

Hasta Que Haya Justicia: Responses to the 2014 Forced Disappearance of the Students of Ayotzinapa, Mexico

Olivia Mozdzierz
Bard College, om6436@bard.edu



Hasta Que Haya Justicia:
Responses to the 2014 Forced Disappearance
of the Students of Ayotzinapa, Mexico

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Olivia Mozdzierz

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
December 2020



Mexican Consulate in New York, September 26, 2020, Photo by the Author

Acknowledgements

To my advisor and mentor, Professor Tom Keenan, for his calm and thoughtful guidance, his patience, and his evident dedication to his students, to scholarship, and to human rights. He has always had my back, and I will be forever grateful to him.

To Professors Miles Rodriguez and Nicole Caso, and Ambassador Frederic Hof, members of my review panel, for their generous time and for providing me with invaluable suggestions and insight into the topic of this paper.

To Kate Doyle at the National Security Archive, for introducing me to the Ayotzinapa case and for bringing me on your team, allowing me to examine a wide range of human rights cases in Latin America.

To my parents, for always supporting me – in everything, but also with help in making sense of legal terms in Spanish.

Finally, to the human rights defenders of Mexico, including at the Centro Prodh and other organizations, to the families of the missing 43, and to the survivors of the terrible crimes against the *normalistas* of Ayotzinapa, for their courage, strength of will, and moral example.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Exactly what happened to 43 university students who were kidnapped by local police in Iguala, Mexico may never be known. On the night of September 26, 2014, police attacked five intercity buses that had been commandeered by students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College in nearby Ayotzinapa, in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero. Although the temporary seizure of buses for transportation to political rallies (the Ayotzinapa students planned to travel to Mexico City for the anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre a few days later) had long been tolerated by authorities, that night police from Iguala and several neighboring towns launched a planned, coordinated assault on the unarmed students. They opened fire on some of the buses, killing a number of students on the scene; with the other buses, the police rounded up those they could catch, loaded them on to trucks and vans and disappeared into the night. Forty-three of the students were never seen again.[1]

Despite multiple investigations by Mexican authorities, multilateral organizations, independent groups, and journalists, there is no definitive explanation for the kidnappings and apparent murders. The remains of none but two of the 43 students have been located. The motive for the police assault, and – according to various accounts – later transfer of the kidnapped students to local narcotics traffickers, the federal police or the army, has never been clearly established. Even against the backdrop of incredible violence that has characterized the brutal reign of Mexico's drug cartels and widespread official corruption, a motivation for abducting and

[1] Archibold, Randal C. "43 Missing Students, a Mass Grave and a Suspect: Mexico's Police." *The New York Times*, October 6, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/world/americas/43-missing-students-a-mass-grave-and-a-suspect-mexicos-police-.html

killing so many young people in plain sight, then hiding their bodies, remains confounding. There are many theories, including that the students had somehow angered Iguala's mayor, or that the students had inadvertently intercepted a planned shipment of heroin or cash in one or more of the buses they took, but the brutality of the events that night in Iguala still makes little sense.[2] To a society long accustomed to senseless violence, this was a shocking crime.

What has become clear is that the response by Mexico's society, its government, and the international community to those crimes marks a significant departure from other such human rights violations in that country's long struggle with narcotics trafficking, corruption, and violence. The sequence of events that night, the motives of the perpetrators, even the identification of those responsible and the location of the victims – however meaningful for accountability and closure – are arguably less important than the reaction of the Mexican people and the wider world. The murder of so many young people at the hands of the authorities, even in the country's most violent crime-plagued state, provoked a wave a popular outrage and activism.[3] The fierce, sustained response shook the political establishment and began a new era in the defense of human rights in Mexico.

---

[2] Goldman, Francisco. "Mexico's Missing Forty-Three: One Year, Many Lies, and a Theory That Might Make Sense." *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2015. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/mexicos-missing-forty-three-one-year-many-lies-and-a-theory-that-might-make-sense

[3] Goldman, Francisco. "Crisis in Mexico: The Protests for the Missing Forty-Three." *The New Yorker*, November 12, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/crisis-mexico-disappearance-forty-three

This paper is about the human rights response to Ayotzinapa, not determining what happened, or even why, although it discusses those issues. This is a review and an analysis of how families, civil society, human rights defenders, and the international community refused to accept yet another atrocity, and began a sustained campaign for justice and accountability. It addresses the challenges facing them, the effectiveness of their efforts, and the lessons their experiences can provide toward advancing the promotion and protection of human rights more broadly. The response to these crimes marks a turning point in Mexico's human rights advocacy, the beginning of greater engagement by the country in confronting abuses and greater political accountability, although with future progress still in doubt.

Led at first by the families of the victims and quickly joined by the broader public and civil society, demonstrations for justice in the case began almost immediately after the disappearances, drawing thousands to protest in the streets in Guerrero, the national capital, Mexico City, and throughout the country. The intensity of the reaction took Mexican authorities by surprise. They quickly put together an official version of events, later discredited and withdrawn, and announced the arrest of 22 police officers two days after the abductions. The mayor of Iguala and his wife went on the run, Guerrero's governor resigned, the federal attorney general and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto were put back on the defensive as protests continued. The public remained unconvinced by their implausible explanations, and the case attracted the attention of the international news media, foreign governments and international human rights organizations.[4] Reluctantly, the Mexican government agreed to accept

[4] Gibler, John. "The Disappeared." *California Sunday Magazine*, January 4, 2015. https://stories.californiasunday.com/2015-01-04/mexico-the-disappeared-en

investigations by independent, international experts, including from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations, which reported ongoing efforts to cover up or otherwise hinder investigations.[5]

With mounting evidence of high-level Mexican government complicity and obstruction, the advocacy efforts of the families and their allies among human rights defenders and journalists persisted and kept the case in the spotlight despite little progress toward determining the fate of the missing. Family members, most of them rural people with basic education, became effective lobbyists for their cause in Mexico City and the wider world, embarking on a tour of the United States to raise awareness, including to Washington and UN headquarters in New York.[6] The election of the populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president in December 2018 gained the Ayotzinapa activists a powerful ally in government, who pledged to investigate the case fully and use the full power of the state to put an end to impunity in the case. Two days after being sworn into office, López Obrador issued a decree establishing an investigatory Truth and Justice Commission, including as members some parents of the victims and their representatives.[7] A new special prosecutor has been named, and the new government's investigation has yielded additional arrests and identification of at least one more of the missing victims' remains. Still,

---

[5] Organization of American States. "CIDH oficializa acuerdo de cooperación técnica sobre estudiantes de Ayotzinapa, México." Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, November 18, 2014. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2014/136.asp

[6] Lovato, Roberto. "How the 'Desaparecidos' of Ayotzinapa Have Sparked a U.S.-Mexican Solidarity Movement." *The Nation*, April 21, 2015. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-desaparecidos-ayotzinapa-have-sparked-us-mexican-solidarity-movement/

[7] Díaz, Gloria and Arturo Rodríguez. "López Obrador formaliza comisión para la verdad y justicia del caso Ayotzinapa." *Proceso*, December 3, 2018. https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2018/12/3/lopez-obrador-formaliza-comision-para-la-verdad-justicia-del-caso-ayotzinapa-216529.htm

even as the families' fight receives greater recognition and support, progress in getting answers and justice for the victims remains slow.

This paper draws on a wide range of published information about the Ayotzinapa case, including contemporary news accounts, testimonies, journalistic investigations, and reports by human rights organizations, Mexican authorities, international commissions, and multilateral organizations on human rights. It has been supplemented by interviews with human rights activists, journalists, and academics, both in Mexico and the United States, focusing on the significance of the Ayotzinapa case for Mexican society and the promotion of human rights more generally.

Chapter 1 serves to introduce the events of the case and immediate response from the perspective of several individuals representing various participants, including one of the victims (based on public information about his life), a family member, a Mexican government official, and a member of civil society. Chapter 2 provides historical context of recent Mexican history, highlighting corruption, violence, flawed institutions, and the role of civil society. Chapter 3 reviews the known and disputed facts of the case, including a chronology, as well as differing accounts and theories about what happened and why. Chapter 4 examines the local and national authorities' public and actual response to the crimes, including cover-up and shifting accounts, which adapt to family, media, NGO and international reactions. Chapter 5 looks at how the families and other advocates for accountability and justice brought sustained pressure, raising the case to national and international prominence despite government efforts, and countering the false official narrative with facts. Chapter 6 provides concluding thoughts on the meaning and

impact of the human rights response in the Ayotzinapa case, including observations from advocates and other commentators.

Chapter 1: Perspectives on Ayotzinapa

As he climbed aboard the bus with the words "Estrella de Oro" emblazoned on the side, Benjamín Bautista could not have imagined that he and his classmates would almost certainly be dead within hours, nor that his student group would soon become internationally-known human rights victims – and perhaps alter the course of Mexican history. Benjamín had arrived in the town of Iguala, in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero earlier that day. He was nineteen years old, studying to be a teacher at the Raúl Isidro Burgos Teachers College in Ayotzinapa, some 90 miles away. For Benjamín and most of his fellow students, the teachers college was one of the few ways that a young person could hope to escape from the hard poverty of rural life. Most of his friends' parents were poor farmers and agricultural workers; Benjamín had been raised by his single mother in the remote mountains, speaking his native Nahuatl language at home. There, he worked in the fields, and helped out his extended family by selling bread his mother baked, while always wanting to study and become a teacher. His mother later said that she had at first asked Benjamin not to go away to Ayoztinapa, but relented when he told her it was his "moment to fly."[8]

The Raúl Isidro Burgos Teachers College was well known in the area for its leftist politics and student activism, typical of many Mexican institutions of higher learning. For years, it had been the regular practice of the school's student teachers to take part in protests and public events both in Guerrero and in the national capital. On that day Benjamín boarded the bus in

---

[8] Rangel, Yunuhen. "Two Years of Torment, of Searching, of Refusing to Give Up." *NACLA.org*, North American Congress on Latin America, September 26, 2016.

Iguala, September 26, 2014, he and his comrades were commandeering a number of intercity buses to take them in a few days to Mexico City. There, they planned to participate in protests commemorating the anniversary of the massacre of students at Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968 – a landmark date in the modern movement against authoritarianism in Mexico.[9]

The practice of students taking over buses and forcing their drivers to transport them to such events was not unusual, and usually peaceful. The students' commandeering of buses that night in Iguala was delayed briefly to allow for one of the bus drivers to have someone bring him a change of clothes and some documents from home. Benjamín may have felt nervous or excited about hijacking the buses, but he understood that until then there had been nothing dangerous about it. In most cases, the police and local authorities had looked the other way, tolerating such actions as inconveniences but not criminal behavior. Drivers were usually instructed not to resist and stay with the buses to ensure their safe return.[10]

Benjamín could be expected to be concerned about the security situation in his state more generally, however, as narcotics traffickers and other organized crime gangs terrorized Mexican society with kidnappings, assassinations, extortions, and other violent crimes. Estimates of those killed in the ongoing drug wars reached 60-70,000 by the mid-2010s, creating a general climate

---

[9] Hernández, Anabel. *A Massacre in Mexico*. Verso, 2020, p.7.
[10] Gibler, John. *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us*. City Lights Books, 2017, p. 220.

of fear among ordinary citizens even though most victims were directly involved in trafficking.[11] Teachers in Acapulco, on Guerrero's coast, went on strike in 2011 to protest extortions and kidnappings, abuses that continued in subsequent years. Guerrero to this day remains known as among the most violent states of Mexico – a fact that Benjamín and his classmates had lived with their entire lives.

With at least two buses already under their control, the Ayotzinapa students were able to commandeer three more in the center of Iguala and prepared to head out. Unbeknownst to them, however, police forces from Iguala and several nearby cities had been monitoring their activities. Without any warning, the police attacked buses in the center of town, opening fire into the vehicles and striking the unarmed students inside. Word of the assault quickly reached the students in the other buses across town. A number of Benjamín's fellow students, or *normalistas* (as teachers college students are known), rushed to the scene from Ayotzinapa and elsewhere in Iguala to find their wounded classmates gathered on the blood-soaked street, littered with shells and broken glass. Soon they had attracted the attention of neighbors, and alerted local teachers and media, who converged on the site only to face a second assault by police, who opened fire again and killed and wounded more. Meanwhile, the police had seized the other buses and rounded up many of the passengers, the survivors (including those fleeing on foot), and put them on trucks and vans heading out of town. Benjamín might have been killed during the assaults; it not even known for certain which of the two *Estrella de Oro* buses he had been on. But if not,

---

[11] Shirk, David, and Joel Wallman. "Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, December 2015, Vol. 59, No. 8, p. 1348. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24546346

he must have known that he and his friends were in mortal danger. He and 42 other students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Teachers College have not been seen alive since.[12]

Shortly before 10 p.m. that evening, parents began receiving calls from their children under siege or on the run in Iguala. Word spread quickly despite the confusion, and soon Hilda Legideño Vargas became aware that something bad was happening. Hilda had not heard anything from her son, Jorge Antonio Tizapa, who had started at Ayotzinapa just two months earlier, and who, she knew, had planned to travel to Iguala that day. Like so many of his fellow students at the teaching college, Jorge had enrolled as a means of escaping from rural poverty and its limited opportunities. He had been working previously as a passenger van driver, putting in long hours for little pay, and concluded that the income would not be enough to help his family and provide for his young daughter. Hilda explained later that she had been proud to see Jorge begin school in Ayotzinapa, as it represented hope for a better life for her son.[13]

Concerned about the news of something happening in Iguala, Hilda went as quickly as she could to the school, some 30 minutes away by motorbike. There, she found many other alarmed parents gathered, sharing the news they had gotten from their sons and friends. The full extent of the crimes was not yet clear. The initial information was that at least one person had been killed in a confrontation with police, and that dozens of students had been arrested. Hilda

---

[12] Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Ayotzinapa Report: Investigation and Initial Conclusions (I)*, *Summary.* Organization of American States, 2015. http://media.wix.com/ugd/3a9f6f_e1df5a84680a4a8a969bd45453da1e31.pdf

[13] Legideño Vargas, Hilda. "One Year After the Disappearance of 43 Mexican Students, Their Mothers are Still Demanding Answers." Interview by Amy Goodman. *Democracynow.org.*, October 5, 2015. https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/5/mexico

and other parents asked for help in getting to Iguala, but there was no way to find out or get to the location of the attacks. Instead, they waited for their children to return to the school, as some had reported that they were on their way. [14]

By the next day, Saturday, a number of *normalistas* who had been in Iguala showed up at the school, and shared with their parents what they had seen and experienced. Hilda's son Jorge was not among them, but the students explained that many of their classmates had run off into the hills when the buses were attacked, and that others would return. But to Hilda's growing alarm, no more students appeared at the school, and so she and other parents traveled to Iguala on that Sunday and Monday (September 28 and 29). There, they heard more detailed accounts of the attacks and abductions, but still had no idea what exactly had happened or where to find their children. Hilda and others searched in vain for their children in the churches and jails, becoming increasingly more frightened and desperate.[15]

Soon, the news of the police assaults – at least two of which took place in the open streets in Iguala's center, in view of local citizens and other witnesses – spread throughout the region and the country. National newspapers reported at least five deaths and 25 wounded, with dozens missing. While Hilda was searching frantically for Jorge in Iguala, other parents and student leaders held a press conference September 27 at the school in Ayotzinapa. They denounced the police actions as extrajudicial killings and demanded the removal of Iguala police chief Felipe

---

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

Flores Velázquez, Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca Velázquez and Guerrero governor Ángel Aguirre Rivero. Federal authorities announced their investigation into the Iguala police that same day, arresting 22 officers a day later. Meanwhile, Mayor Abarca denied any knowledge of the attacks until after the fact.[16]

Hilda later recalled that those early days and months after her son's disappearance were very difficult. "There was no peace in our heart," she said. "We couldn't stand to be at home, as seeing his things would make us sad, and often we couldn't even eat, but people told us that we had to look after ourselves to move forward."[17] Together with the other parents of the missing, and aided by activist groups including unions, political action and human rights groups, Hilda moved forward by mobilizing in public protests against the Mexican government's apparent complicity and inaction. As protests in Guerrero and Mexico City grew, Hilda was often there, and she traveled to the United States and other Latin American countries to help sustain international awareness of the crimes, giving testimony on news programs and addressing gatherings. Antonio Tizapa, Hilda's husband and Jorge's father, took up the protests in New York, where he had been working as a plumber in Brooklyn to support the family since Jorge was five years old. Antonio organized vigils, hunger strikes and publicity runs on behalf of the missing in Ayotzinapa, including protesting in front of the Mexican consulate in New York on the 26th day of each month.[18] Back in Mexico, Hilda never wavered in her conviction that the

[16] Ocampo Arista, Sergio. "Policías balean a normalistas de Ayotzinapa en Iguala." *La Jornada*, September 28, 2014. https://www.jornada.com.mx/2014/09/28/politica/005n1pol
[17] Legideño Vargas.
[18] Vilchis, Raúl. "For an Aggrieved Father, the New York City Marathon is More Than a Race." *The Guardian*, November 3, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/nov/03/for-an-aggrieved-father-the-new-york-city-marathon-is-more-than-a-race

authorities were behind her son's disappearance and that they were covering up the truth. When the new López Obrador government formed a Truth and Justice Commission to address the Ayotzinapa case in early 2019, Hilda was one of five family members appointed to serve on the panel.[19]

Jesús Murillo Karam, Mexico's federal attorney general, assumed official control of the Ayotzinapa investigation from Guerrero state authorities October 4, after it had become clear that local authorities were incapable of conducting a credible inquiry – or, at least, one that could appear credible to the public. The arrest of 22 police officers, the flight of Mayor Abarca and identification of the Guerreros Unidos drug syndicate as likely responsible for the ultimate fate of the missing students had done little to curb growing popular anger at authorities at all levels. President Peña Nieto apparently recognized that the fierce local reaction and widespread scrutiny would require a federal response.

That response included scores of arrests of local police, public officials, and criminal gang members over the following month, allowing Murillo's team to assemble an official version of events but uncover virtually no traces of the missing students. Protests grew steadily over the acknowledged collusion among local officials, police and drug gangs and the lack of progress in finding the victims. Demonstrators occupied and set fire to state government offices in Guerrero's capital October 13, forcing Governor Aguirre to step down ten days later. General

---

[19]Government of Mexico. Comisión para la Verdad y Acceso a la Justica en el Caso Ayotzinapa. http://www.comisionayotzinapa.segob.gob.mx/es/Comision_para_la_Verdad#005

strikes, marches, and mass demonstrations throughout Mexico but, especially in the capital, increased the pressure on Murillo and Peña Nieto.[20] The Mexican president pledged to make the case a "priority" for his government and met for hours with family members at his official residence on October 29.[21]

Following a month of arrests, investigation, and forensic searches, Murillo was ready November 7 to hold a press conference to deliver his findings – the official version of events, what he would later call the "historical truth" of the case. The attorney general maintained that the Ayotzinapa students had been attacked on the orders of Iguala Mayor Arbaca, who was concerned that the students would disrupt an event his wife was hosting (both the mayor and his wife had been arrested a few days earlier, after weeks on the run). Those that had been detained by the police, Murillo reported, were turned over to Arbaca's allies among the Guerreros Unidos, who believed the *normalistas* to be members of a rival drug gang, "Los Rojos." The Guerreros Unidos then executed the students, burned their bodies overnight at a nearby dump, and then collected the ashes and disposed of them in a stream. To substantiate his claims, Murillo showed video footage of Guerreros Unidos members confessing to the actions described. Forensics experts had searched through the supposed remains of the murdered students, he said, but could find no usable DNA evidence, except for that of one victim.[22]

---

[20] Goldman, Francisco. "Crisis in Mexico: Could Forty-Three Missing Students Spark a Revolution?" *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/crisis-mexico-forty-three-missing-students-spark-revolution
[21] Maldonado, Tryno. *Faces of the Disappeared, Ayotzinapa: A Chronicle of Injustice*. Schaffner Press, 2018, pp. 23-28.
[22] González Rodríguez, Sergio. *The Iguala 43: The Truth and Challenge of Mexico's Disappeared Students*. Semiotext(e), 2015, pp. 128-139.

It was an incredible story, one that raised many questions and would later be effectively and thoroughly challenged by multiple experts and independent reviews. For now, though, it was the official story. Earlier in the day, in a hangar at the airport in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero, Murillo had briefed the family members of the victims in a forty-minute meeting that he characterized afterward as "painful, peaceful, and very respectful." The family members heard Murillo's findings but spoke out publicly afterwards to reject them and call again on the government to find their children.[23] At the end of his press conference hours later in Mexico City, Murillo cut off further questions by declaring softly, "*Ya me cansé*" (literally, "I'm tired," or "I've had enough"). Within hours, this admission – which many took to signify the indifference of the government – was taken up by protesters throughout the country. That phrase spread throughout social media with the tag #Yamecanse, and the words, "*Ya me cansé del miedo*" ("I've had enough fear") were spray-painted the following day on the building housing Murillo's office.[24]

Among those who found the government's version and handling of the case suspect was Mexican human rights lawyer Santiago Aguirre Espinosa. Aguirre, then deputy director of the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (better known as Centro Prodh) in Mexico

---

[23] Ocampo, Sergio and Rubicela Morelos. "Padres de los normalistas exigen pruebas científicas." *La Jornada*, November 8, 2014. https://www.jornada.com.mx/2014/11/08/politica/003n1pol

[24] Associated Press. "'I've Had Enough' Says Mexican Attorney General in Missing Students Gaffe." *The Guardian*, November 9, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/09/protests-flare-in-mexico-after-attorney-generals-enough-im-tired-remarks

City, heard about the attacks in Iguala almost immediately, as a team from his center had been investigating an unrelated massacre in Guerrero on that day.[25] The scale of the police assault and the abduction of so many apparently innocent young civilians were shocking, even to an experienced human rights defender such as Aguirre. In the weeks that followed, Aguirre, working together with a Guerrero-based human rights group, the Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña Tlachinollan, took up the cause of the disappeared students' families and eventually served as their legal counsel.

Aguirre could appreciate even in those early days how the Ayotzinapa crimes – the coordinated action of the state and criminal gangs against everyday people – might unleash a wave of protest from Mexican society, forced to endure high levels of violent crime, oppression, and official impunity. Speaking on national radio, Aguirre in October characterized the killings and disappearances as "the single most serious act of massive human rights violations in the past 40 years" in the country.[26] As mass protests, marches, violent demonstrations, and global appeals were increasing in intensity, Aguirre and other human rights defenders were also keeping close watch on the Mexican government's efforts to limit the political fallout and close the case as quickly as possible.

---

[25] Franco, Marina. "Five Years Ago, 43 Students Vanished. The Mystery, and the Pain, Remain." *The New York Times*, September 26, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/world/americas/Ayotzinapa-mexico-students-anniversary.html

[26] 20 Minutos. "Normalista: 'A Julio C. Mondragón lo desollaron porque escupió a la cara del agresor." *20minutos.com.mx*, October 30, 2014. https://www.20minutos.com.mx/noticia/18960/0/normalistas/iguala/escupir-cara-agresor-asesinato/

Aguirre became a vocal critic of the government's investigation and, later, bungled prosecutions, highlighting discrepancies in Murillo's account that were explored more fully by independent experts (beginning with the GIEI, or Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2015-16, with whom Aguirre cooperated closely). Confessions by the Guerreros Unidos members had clearly been gained through torture, Aguirre and most other observers concluded. The government mishandled evidence, closed off access to documentation and potential witnesses, failed to look critically at the improbable disposal of the victims' remains by fire, and did not pursue the murder and kidnapping charges against even the supposed perpetrators. Worst of all, from Aguirre's perspective as a representative of the families, the government failed to find the missing students. Aguirre and many other members of civil society welcomed the election of President López Obrador in 2018 and his pledge to end corruption and impunity (like Hilda Legideño, Aguirre was named to serve on the new Truth and Justice Commission).

The attacks, disappearances and murders of the students of the Raúl Isidro Burgos Teachers College in Iguala, Mexico that night set in motion an enduring campaign by family members to seek answers and accountability, if not the return of their sons. It prompted the Mexican authorities to obstruct efforts to get at the full truth of those crimes. And it encouraged Mexican civil society to forge new alliances at home and around the world to demand fundamental change, long overdue in a country plagued by violence and corruption. Ayotzinapa began with the state's human rights violations of a hundred or so individuals. It also forced a national response that illustrates the challenges and effectiveness of human rights promotion, and may well mark a turning point in the course of modern Mexican history.

Chapter 2: Guerrero's History of Violence and Impunity

As shocking as the attacks on the Ayotzinapa students were to Mexican society and the wider world, they were nevertheless a product of the region's violent history, which has long been marked by political turmoil, government oppression and corruption, poverty, savage drug cartels, and weak public institutions and civil society. These factors by themselves cannot explain the crimes, but they provide necessary context to help understand how such horrific human rights violations could be committed, and how they came as a breaking point for so many long accustomed to abuse, moving citizens and advocates to act.

For over seventy years, Mexico had been governed by a one-party state, as the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained its hold on power at every level throughout the country despite the pretense of democracy and disputed elections. The PRI dominated Mexico's political and economic life by effectively co-opting much of society through patronage and corruption, and, when necessary, using the machinery of the state to commit electoral fraud, and security forces to suppress dissent. Its ideology was nominally leftist, in keeping with the revolutionary Mexican Constitution of 1917, but, in practice, the PRI's principal objective was to preserve its absolute rule. Mexico developed into what Mario Vargas Llosa famously characterized in 1990 as a "perfect dictatorship...a camouflaged dictatorship," with all the features of a dictatorship, albeit of a party rather than a single leader (Octavio Paz replied that Mexico was, rather, a "hegemonic system of domination," although that must have been a

distinction without a difference for millions of Mexicans whose rights were denied by the governing party).[27]

Whether a form of dictatorship or a "hegemonic system of domination," the PRI ensured not only its own survival, but also the suppression of democracy and civil society, attacking opposition through extrajudicial violence and fraud whenever pressure tactics and bribery failed. By the late 1960s, popular dissatisfaction with social inequality, corruption, and government oppression led to large-scale protests against the Mexican government, particularly among university student groups. These led to violent conflicts, most infamously in the cases of the government's massacre of protesters on the eve of the 1968 Olympics and then three years later in the "Corpus Christi" massacre.[28]

In the first incident, known as "Tlatelolco" for the district in Mexico City where it took place, government troops and police opened fire on thousands of students, killing hundreds in a brutal show of force. Students, labor activists and others had been facing off against police throughout that summer in growing protests over social inequality, democracy, and against massive public spending to host the Olympic Games in Mexico City.[29] Determined that such displays would not damage Mexico's image during the games, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz

---

[27] "Vargas Llosa: México es una Dictadura Perfecta." *El Pais*, September 1, 1990. https://elpais.com/diario/1990/09/01/cultura/652140001_850215.html
[28] Miller, Ashley. "Truth Obscured: 41st Anniversary of Mexico's Corpus Christi Massacre." *UNREDACTED*, National Security Archive, 11 June 2012, unredacted.com/2012/06/11/truth-obscured-41st-anniversary-of-mexicos-corpus-christi-massacre/
[29] Woodman, Stephen. "Mexico Students v the State: Anniversary of 1968 Massacre Reopens Recent Wounds." *BBC News*, BBC, 1 Oct. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-45705009.

directed on October 2, 1968 that the military and police put a bloody end to the demonstrations and then ensured that the full story of the action would not get out until well after the Olympics. The government's version of events (e.g., that casualties were a small fraction of the real number, that the students had shot first, that the action had not been planned) did not prevail for long, however, and Tlateloco soon became an enduring symbol of PRI oppression and of the Mexican people's fight for their rights. It was to attend a commemoration of Tlateloco's anniversary that the Ayotzinapa students had been collecting funds and commandeering transportation when they were attacked, kidnapped, and almost certainly murdered.

Under a new government headed by President Luis Echeverría (elected in 1970, and Díaz Ordaz's former interior minister), the hard line against dissent continued. University students hoping to resume the movement cut down in 1968 were infiltrated, harassed, and beaten by government-backed youth squads. At the first major student demonstration in Mexico City since Tlateloco on June 10, 1971, the combined forces of the PRI-organized paramilitary group *Los Halcones* ("the Falcons") and the police attacked unarmed protesters, killing dozens and wounding hundreds more. Once again, the Mexican government sought to distance itself from its crime, which came to be known as the Corpus Christi massacre or "El Halconazo," but the brutal message was clear to all who would openly oppose the PRI.

The late 1960s saw the emergence of organized, radical opposition to the Mexican government, as leftist guerilla groups formed to fight against the PRI-led regime as the university students by themselves could not. In Guerrero, these included the ACNR (the National Civic Revolutionary Association), headed by Genaro Vázquez Rojas, and the *Partido de los Pobres*

("Party of the Poor," or PdlP), led by Lucio Cabañas Barrientos. The ACNR's roots go back a decade earlier, to Vázquez's leadership of peaceful opposition to the corrupt and abusive rule of Governor Luis Raúl Caballero, who was finally removed from office by the federal government after a massacre of protestors in the state capital of Chilpancingo in December 1960. Although the PRI felt compelled to oust Caballero, unfortunately it did not reject his repressive methods – rather, it came to rely on them to counter civil protest. The PdlP, meanwhile, was founded in reaction to yet another massacre by government forces, of student and leftist protesters in Ayotac, Guerrero, in May 1967. Until that point, Cabañas – a teacher and communist activist, himself a graduate of the Ayotzinapa teachers college – had fought for social justice by peaceful means, but after Ayotac he fled into the Guerrero countryside and organized a formidable guerrilla force, working in concert with Vazquez's ACNR and other armed groups.[30]

The actions of Cabañas and other leftist guerilla groups in Guerrero, including armed attacks, kidnappings of senior officials for ransom and political advantage, bombings, and murders, caused state and federal authorities to escalate their campaign of repression in turn, taking the country into what became known as Mexico's "Dirty War." Although the "Dirty War" was waged throughout the nation, the violence in Guerrero was especially intense, as the PdlP, ACNR and others infuriated the government by its successes in taking advantage of the state's mountainous, rural terrain and its popular support among the mostly indigenous poor. Police and military forces applied brutal force against not only the guerillas, but also innocent civilians, engaging in extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced disappearances, terrorizing

[30] Aviña, Alexander. "Seizing Hold of Memories in Moments of Danger." *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-82,* edited by Fernando Herrera Calderon and Adela Cedillo, Taylor and Francis, 2012, pp. 40-59.

villages throughout the state. The number of persons killed by the government during the "Dirty War" will never be known, but certainly thousands perished. A report by Guerrero's Truth Commission released in October 2014 documented more than 200 cases of forced disappearances, a fraction of the estimated total.[31] Some victims survived detention for years in clandestine prisons or on military bases, and were eventually released, but most were taken and never reappeared. Over time, the Mexican government's counterinsurgency efforts succeeded in overwhelming the armed resistance. Vázquez died while on the run in February 1972 and the military finally managed to track down and kill Cabañas, along with his senior leadership, in December 1974. By applying huge increases in manpower, deadly force, and savage tactics toward suspected sympathizers, relatives, neighbors and rebels alike, the Mexican government managed to suppress the insurgency in Guerrero, but at great human and moral cost.

The absolute dominance of the PRI in Mexico ended in 2000, with the first truly contested national elections resulting in the election of President Vicente Fox (of the center-right National Action Party, or PAN). Until then, the PRI had accepted defeats at the hands of the PAN and the left-wing PRI splinter Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) at the local and state levels, while maintaining its grip on the presidency and the national government. The PRI had become increasingly discredited for its corruption and electoral fraud, as well as for its performance in addressing the economic crisis of 1994, providing the PAN and the PRD with an opening to achieve gains in 1997 legislative elections. With the PRI's loss of the presidency Mexico entered a new era of multiparty democracy, in which other political parties could

---

[31] Truth Commission of the State of Guerrero, *Final Activity Report*. October 15, 2014. http://congresogro.gob.mx/files/InformeFinalCOMVERDAD.pdf

compete and win offices at every level. Prior to 2000, the PAN had managed to win the governorships of eight Mexican states, primarily in the north, while the PRD had won four, including Mexico City. The following decade saw the PRD win governorships in a dozen states, a large number of those in the south. In Guerrero, the PRD won the governorship in 2005 and again in 2011, while making similar progress at the municipal and level.

Unfortunately, in Guerrero's case, breaking the political stranglehold of the PRI meant exchanging one corrupt or ineffective regime for another. While the PRD was formed in reaction to concerns that the PRI had abandoned its revolutionary and social justice roots, in practice many politicians simply switched party labels for political advantage. Most PRD leaders were former PRI members, who maintained or re-established their existing networks of political and economic connections, including with the drug cartels (there were many exceptions, especially early on; in the 1990's local PRD members were even assassinated for their opposition). The second PRD governor of Guerrero, Ángel Aguirre Rivero, for example, abandoned his position in the PRI (as a senator) just months before running successfully for election in 2011. Aguirre was forced to step down as governor in October 2014 over his mishandling and suspected complicity in the Ayotzinapa case. One of the key figures in the Ayotzinapa kidnappings and murders, if not the mastermind, was another PRD official, Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca Velázquez. Abarca won election after backing Aguirre financially in his race, and brought with him close personal and operational ties to the Guerreros Unidos, as was later made clear. While the long single-party rule of the PRI in Mexico can be blamed for many political and social flaws, it is clear that the transition to multiparty democracy was not enough to clear out the systemic corruption that kept states like Guerrero poor and vulnerable to abuse.

Political and social unrest in Guerrero has long been fueled by its extreme poverty and income inequality, which have improved over the past century with Mexico's overall development, but continue to lag far behind the rest of the country. By most measures, Guerrero is one of the poorest states in Mexico, usually occupying next-to-last place, with neighboring Chiapas at the very bottom. According to a Mexican government review published in 2012, 67.6 percent of Guerrero's population lives in poverty, including 31.6 percent who live in conditions of extreme poverty. The "non-vulnerable" population of the state is just 7.3 percent, the second-lowest percentage of Mexico's 31 states.[32] Guerrero is ranked next to last in terms of its intensity of poverty (according to social indicators such as education, housing, access to health services, access to food, etc.). The state was the only one categorized as "polarized," registering high levels of marginalization, and it also registered at the bottom in terms of income inequality.[33] Wealth and power remain concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority, in other words, with effective segregation between those with means and the rest of the state's population. Guerrero has several municipalities with the highest levels of extreme poverty (above 80 percent) in the entire country. Not coincidentally, those municipalities and others in its range elsewhere in the country were overwhelmingly indigenous (over 70 percent speaking an indigenous language).[34] Indigenous communities face significant socio-economic obstacles because of language and diminished access to social services; roughly one-fifth of Guerrero's population is indigenous, with a large minority of those speaking little to no Spanish.

---

[32] National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy. *Report of Poverty in Mexico 2010: The Country, Its States and Its Municipalities*. CONEVAL, 2012, pp. 30-31.
[33] Ibid, pp. 42-44.
[34] Ibid, p. 73.

Guerrero's political turmoil, corruption, poverty, and geography all contributed to the state's growth as a major producer of illegal drugs, and, with it, the devastating impact of violent crime. The mountainous terrain is well suited to the cultivation of highly-profitable illicit crops, both in yields and the ability to evade detection (whether outright or by being remote enough to bribe or intimidate authorities into staying out of the way). From the 1960s Guerrero was a significant source of marijuana for the U.S. market, but it is estimated that now most marijuana production goes toward domestic consumption. Poppy cultivation and heroin production in Guerrero have skyrocketed since the mid-1990s, however, mostly feeding the U.S. demand that has increased significantly in recent years. Guerrero now ranks among the largest sources of heroin in the world, estimated in 2015 to produce between 50 and 70 percent of the entire country's production, nearly all for the U.S. market.[35]

The organized criminal groups engaged in drug trafficking have drawn Guerrero into an ongoing violent conflict that resembles war or a country under siege. Mexican authorities responded to their rise by stepping up their presence and enforcement, as well as their eradication of illegal crops (as part of the nationwide "war on drugs," which was augmented in 2006 by bringing in the Mexican military to supplement local, state and federal police forces). The "war on drugs" succeeded in making some high-profile arrests and seizures, but has largely failed to rein in the cartels, while drug-related violence has exploded. Guerrero recorded the highest rate of homicide of any Mexican state in the two years before the Ayotzinapa kidnappings, due to the

---

[35] Kyle, Chris. *Violence and Insecurity in Guerrero*. Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars and Justice in Mexico, University of San Diego, January 2015, p. 13.

intense levels of violent attacks by organized criminal groups against rivals, the police, and the general public.[36]

The Beltrán Leyva group, affiliated with the Sinaloa cartel, dominated Guerrero from the late 1990s until the killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva by Mexican marines in December 2009. Afterwards, the group fragmented into at least nine separate drug trafficking groups, which escalated the violence in the state even further, and without diminishing their strength relative to the government. Indeed, these various groups were as successful as the Beltrán Leyva brothers had been in infiltrating and co-opting local officials and security forces, and similarly effective in fighting or eluding authorities when necessary.

Among the drug-trafficking groups that were formed in the early 2010s was the Guerreros Unidos (literally, "United Warriors," with the added significance of the state's name), who would later be identified as among the killers of the Ayotzinapa students. Like their rivals, the Guerreros Unidos engage in a wide range of criminal activities, including kidnappings, extortion, contraband, and homicide, in addition to trafficking in heroin and marijuana. The Guerreros Unidos and other successor groups, moreover, were even more ferocious and predatory than their predecessor, using violence to send messages not only to their rivals but also to the general population, whose cooperation they hoped to secure through brutal intimidation. Kidnappings and killings soared, as the drug trafficking groups targeted both the relatively wealthy and people of modest means. One analyst writes that the Guerreros Unidos strengthened their hold on Iguala and Taxco by developing "among the most efficient extortion and

---

[36] Ibid, pp. 15-16.

kidnapping operations to be found in Mexico."[37] Safe houses were set up throughout the countryside, usually with burial grounds attached to dispose of the bodies of the victims, often whether ransoms were paid or not. In the search for the remains of the missing Ayotzinapa students in 2014 and onwards, many such sites were discovered by investigators, complicating their search but also revealing the scope of these crimes.

Confronted by state oppression, poverty and isolation, and drug gang violence, the people of Guerrero have also been made vulnerable by weak or complicit public institutions, and an underdeveloped and badly outmatched civil society. For many, the impunity and lack of accountability weigh as heavily as the crimes and abuses themselves. The Mexican government in Guerrero, from the municipal level up to the most senior national leadership, has for decades committed the most serious human rights violations in the name of preserving power, silencing dissent, and fighting criminal drug trafficking. Often the authorities have colluded with the criminal organizations. Given the police and the military's poor record in actually defeating the cartels, it remains an open question whether their failure is due to their complicity or their incompetence. In any case, the people of Guerrero know that they cannot depend on official law enforcement to keep them safe, and they know that they cannot expect that those officers who commit crimes in the "war on drugs" will be held responsible.

The judicial system in Guerrero, as elsewhere in Mexico, lacks credibility. Prosecutors act (or do not act) according to political direction from the executive and under influence from the cartels. The former president of the state congress's Human Rights Commission, Jorge

---

[37] Ibid, p. 32.

Salazar Marchán, characterized the judiciary in 2014 as "the most corrupt institution in Guerrero."[38] This view was shared by 62.7 percent of Guerrero citizens surveyed that same year, who agreed that the judicial system was "corrupt."[39] Officials implicated in serious crimes not only escaped punishment but were sometimes elevated: after the murder by police of two Ayotzinapa students in 2011, a federal police officer involved, Alfredo Álvarez, was named by Governor Aguirre as chief of police in Acapulco, the state's largest and most crime-ridden city. As in so many such cases, no one was ever prosecuted for those deaths.

In response to the widespread lack of confidence in the police, volunteers in Guerrero began forming informal "community police" forces in the mid-1990s to supplement or even serve as a more effective and responsive alternative to state and municipal police. Organized by rural indigenous groups, agricultural cooperatives, and church activists, among others, these community police were initially seen by some as a possible model for police reform. Over time, however, these volunteers suffered abuse and pressure from their official counterparts, and, even worse, came to be seen as equally subject to corruption and intimidation from drug traffickers.

With low levels of trust in the police and justice system, and no meaningful alternatives, citizens in Guerrero have become reluctant to even report crimes. No doubt, the highest rates of homicide, kidnapping and other violent crimes registered in Guerrero are, in fact, some fraction of their true levels. According to Mexican government surveys in 2014, 95.8 percent of crimes went unreported in Guerrero, including 99.0 percent of extortion cases. Fully 86.8 per cent of

---

[38] Open Society Foundations. *Broken Justice in Mexico's Guerrero State*. Open Society, 2015, p. 32.
[39] Ibid, p. 34.

Guerrero citizens judged their situations as "unsafe," one of the highest percentages in the country.[40]

Caught between corrupt, abusive or useless authorities on one hand and brutal criminal organizations on the other, the people of Guerrero have found limited space for the development of civil society organizations. The first civic groups organized in the state focused primarily on land, labor, and other local issues, along with other, broadly-oriented human rights advocacy groups in the early 1990s. Campesinos, teachers, and indigenous activists, some supported by the Catholic and other church groups, formed associations and demonstrated for their rights, frequently drawing forceful responses from government and PRI authorities who sought to discredit them as criminals or violent revolutionaries. The OCSS (Organización Campesina de la Sierra del Sur), for example, had been formed for just a year and a half when 17 of its members were killed by police in the June 1995 "Aguas Blancas" massacre. Among the first groups dedicated to human rights violations were associations of family members of the disappeared, joining forces with a national-level group, the Association of Relatives of the Detained, Disappeared and Victims of Human Rights Abuses (AFADEM), which had been founded back in 1977. Groups such as the Voice for Those Without a Voice Human Rights Committee and the Tlachinollan Human Rights Center (which remains among the most prominent Guerrero human

---

[40] National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). *National Survey of Victimization and Perceptions of Public Security (ENVIPE)*. Government of Mexico, 2015. https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/envipe/2015/doc/envipe2015_presentacion_nacional.pdf

rights groups to this day, providing legal services and advocacy to rural populations) were established in the early 1990s.[41]

The appeals of Guerrero human rights organizations had long been largely ignored by Mexican authorities, however, despite successes in raising popular and international awareness of their concerns. A public, state-level commission for human rights was established in 1990, but its impact was limited. As the Human Rights Commission became more stridently critical of the state government, it was effectively shut down; in June 2014 Guerrero Governor Aguirre – without legal authority – removed the president of the commission and replaced him with a political ally. Frustrated by efforts to seek justice on individual cases of disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and other violations by police and military forces, human rights organizations began to look past their state and national institutions toward international organizations for assistance. Mexican authorities could not be counted on to investigate and prosecute their own crimes, even those of many years in the past. The creation in 2001 of a Special Prospector to investigate the "Dirty War" was initially viewed with hope in Guerrero, but soon it became evident that the body would neither fulfill its mandate nor protect witnesses; the office closed down five years later, with its report ignored by the government and no one convicted. In desperation, human rights groups turned to the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and various UN human rights bodies, including its system of special rapporteurs. In those multilateral organizations their appeals were

[41] Peace Brigades International. *Human Rights Defenders in the State of Guerrero*. PBI Mexico Project, 2007, pp. 13-14, 24-25. https://pbi-mexico.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/mexico/files/Defenderes_Guerrero_PBI_Mexico_ENG.pdf

heard, and in some cases provisional remedies (*medidas cautelares*) were even issued, however often ignored or otherwise not implemented by Mexican authorities.

It was in this oppressive and bleak environment that the kidnappings and murders of the Ayotzinapa students took place, in an impoverished, rural state long dominated by political elites, terrorized by drug traffickers and security forces, and characterized by outrageous impunity. For the families of the victims, the reality of those brutal crimes was all too familiar – shocking, but not surprising, given the region's bloody history.



Source: Map created by the Author based on Google Maps free use template.

Chapter 3: The Facts of the Case

In order to understand the human rights responses to the Ayotzinapa case, the background details and the disagreement about critical facts in the case must be examined, as they drove popular demands for accountability. Given the scale of the operation and the number of eyewitnesses in a mostly urban setting, Mexican authorities had to concede publicly that municipal police were involved, but quickly pushed a narrative that excluded any state or federal involvement. They also put responsibility for the disappearances on a prominent drug cartel and maintained that they were certain that all the missing students had been killed. In doing so, the Mexican government provoked a backlash by angry families, activists and other observers who saw the official line – with its proposed sequence of events and motive for the crimes – as an obvious cover-up designed to divert blame and make the case "go away."

Reports of the attacks on the students the evening of September 26, 2014, with some allowances for initial confusion in media accounts, were generally consistent even from the first day. Dozens of Ayotzinapa students survived the attacks, joined by other students, local teachers, and journalists whom they alerted as the first police assaults were underway. With so many witnesses, Guerrero state and federal authorities were forced to acknowledge that police had, at a minimum, used deadly force against unarmed students in multiple locations, and accepted most of the basic facts reported by the students and others. Their investigations and conclusions about those facts would be another matter entirely.

Among the first national media accounts of the Iguala attacks were published in the Mexican dailies *El Universal* and *La Jornada*, documenting in detail the accounts provided by the students and confirmed by state authorities.[42] [43] Both articles, which were published early September 28, indicated that municipal police and presumed criminals opened fire on several separate occasions, killing six people and wounding dozens more. Although the *El Universal* report provided a detailed timeline of the attacks, complete with maps and graphics, neither account reported on the attacks on two other buses commandeered by Ayotzinapa students elsewhere in the city (one of which accounted for roughly half of those who were kidnapped). Guerrero state prosecutors were cited as reporting that the entire Iguala municipal police force had been disarmed pending the ongoing investigation, but claimed not to know why Ayotzinapa students were maintaining that at least 25 of their classmates were missing. *La Jornada* reported that the surviving students alleged that state and federal police had taken part in the attacks, in addition to the municipal police. In the days that followed these initial reports, more details about the full extent of the attacks and the precise number of missing became public and widely known, as Mexican officials at the same time began to build their false narrative to fit the available evidence.

---

[42] Pigeonutt, Vania. "Policías atacan a normalistas en Guerrero." *El Universal*, September 28, 2014. https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/2014/policias-atacan-a-normalistas-en-guerrero-1041696.html
[43] Ocampo Arista.

The sequence of events on September 26 and 27 has been well documented in the reports [44] [45] of the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI, in Spanish) named by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which also documented the Mexican government's flawed investigations and conclusions (as will be addressed in the following chapter), and in accounts collected by journalists such as Anabel Hernández [46] and John Gibler. [47] All this information was assembled in a comprehensive multimedia project [48] by the University of London's Forensic Architecture group, at the request of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EEAF, in Spanish) and the human rights group Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez (Centro Prodh, which has worked as advocates for the victims' families). The following timeline draws on the above sources, which are nearly completely consistent with each other.

For the October 2 commemoration of the Tlatelolco massacre, the Ayotzinapa students had been tasked with coming up with transportation to the events in Mexico City for a number of rural teachers colleges nationwide, for which they planned to commandeer about fifteen intercity

[44] Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Informe Ayotzinapa (I): Investigación y primeras conclusiones de las desapariciones y homocidios de los normalistas de Ayotzinapa*. Organization of American States, 2015. https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/actividades/giei/giei-informeayotzinapa1.pdf
[45] Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Informe Ayotzinapa II: Avances y nuevas conclusiones sobre la investigación, búsqueda y atención a las víctimas*. Organization of American States, 2016. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/actividades/giei/GIEI-InformeAyotzinapa2.pdf
[46] Hernández, *A Massacre*.
[47] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine.*
[48] Forensic Architecture. *The Enforced Disappearance of the Ayotzinapa Students*. Forensic-architecture.org, 2017. https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-enforced-disappearance-of-the-ayotzinapa-students

buses.[49] By September 26 they had managed to secure just a handful. The students had found the bus terminal and other likely sites in the nearby state capital, Chilpancingo, guarded by an unusually heavy police presence, and so decided to try their luck in Iguala, about two hours' drive north of the school-- Iguala being Guerrero's third-largest city, with a population of around 100,000. At around six o'clock the afternoon of September 26, eighty to ninety students set out from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College to Iguala, riding in two buses ("Estrella de Oro" bus company, numbers 1531 and 1568) that they had taken days earlier in Chilpancingo, before security there tightened.[50]

The two buses stopped in separate locations just outside Iguala, at a highway rest stop and a toll booth, where the *normalistas* began approaching cars for donations (another longstanding practice of the rural teaching students) and scouting for buses to take over. At approximately 8:30 p.m., the students with Estrella de Oro 1531 stopped an Iguala-bound passenger bus, whose driver agreed to allow them to take the bus, but on condition that he be allowed to first drop off his passengers at the city-center terminal. About ten students boarded that bus for the trip to the station, but were then locked inside the bus (presumably by the driver) at the terminal after the passengers had gotten off.[51] At that point, the *normalistas* on board the locked bus called to their comrades on the two Estrella de Oro buses to come to the station and free them.[52]

[49] GIEI, *Ayoztinapa I*, p. 22.
[50] Ibid, pp. 24-26.
[51] Ibid, p. 33.
[52] Hernández, p. 373.

The Ayotzinapa students maintain that they had not planned on entering the city center, perhaps fearing stepped-up security at the terminal as they had seen in Chilpancingo. Upon arriving at the Iguala bus station, however, the students on the first two buses were able to free their trapped classmates quickly, and saw that the lightly-guarded station offered them an opportunity to pick up several buses at once.[53] They moved fast, fanning out and taking three buses: "Costa Line" 2012 and 2510 and "Estrella Roja" 3278. With five buses now under their control, the students headed out of the terminal at about 9:20 p.m., with the two Costa Line and two Estrella de Oro buses heading north, and the Estrella Roja departing by a separate entrance to the south (the differing routes were likely due to unfamiliarity with the city layout and the need to move quickly to evade a police response).[54]

Police attempted to stop the Costa Line buses and Estrella de Oro 1568 six blocks north of the station, near the city square, by firing warning shots into the air, but the small convoy managed to get past them. At that point, the last bus in that group, Estrella de Oro 1531, broke off and turned to the east, presumably to avoid the police but also along a more direct route toward Ayotzinapa.[55] The group of three buses continued north along the same road, until reaching a police blockade some fifteen blocks farther north, just before ten o'clock. Some of the students exited their buses to attempt to push a police vehicle out the way, when the police began to open fire.[56] One student was shot in the head, delivering a wound that left him in a permanent vegetative state. A number of police vehicles arrived behind the stopped buses and opened fire

---

[53] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I*, pp. 37-38.
[54] Ibid, p. 39-40.
[55] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine,* pp. 62-65.
[56] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I,* pp. 50-52.

on the last bus, Estrella de Oro 1568, riddling it with bullets and injuring several students on board. For reasons that remain unknown, the students from that bus, with one exception, were brought together on the ground beside the bus, loaded onto police patrol vehicles, and taken away.[57] They were never seen again alive. A few of the students were removed from the scene by an ambulance, but the rest of them remained near the damaged buses as the police left the area. The *normalistas* indicated later that they were determined to stay and preserve the crime scene, marking shell casings with stones and beginning to alert others, including classmates on the other buses and back at Ayotzinapa. Two vans of more senior students left at once from Ayotzinapa to Iguala, reaching out by phone to contacts at Iguala schools and the local news media along the way.[58]

At roughly the same time as the attack on the three buses in the north of Iguala, police stopped and attacked the second Estrella de Oro bus, which had traveled about four miles before it was stopped under an overpass in front of the city's courthouse, *Palacio de Justicia*. There, police destroyed the bus and tear-gassed the students on board, forcing them outside. All the occupants, except for the bus driver, were then forced onto police vehicles and driven away.[59] Those young men joined those taken on the other Estrella de Oro bus to become known as the Ayotzinapa 43, the disappeared.

Shortly after the assault on that bus, police stopped the Estrella Roja bus travelling on the same road, not far behind. In contrast to the other attacks, there was no gunfire and the students

[57] Ibid, p. 57-59.
[58] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine*, pp. 82-86, 116-118.
[59] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I*, pp. 61-66.

were allowed to disembark before the driver of the bus was sent onwards. The *normalistas* fled into the surrounding neighborhoods, and into hiding as police patrols searched for them overnight.[60]

Yet another bus, this one transporting members of the *Los Avispones* youth soccer team from their match in Iguala back to Chilpancingo, was attacked by police and suspected criminals on the main road south at approximately 11:30 pm. The attackers opened fire on the bus, killing one passenger and mortally wounding the driver. At first, they attempted to force the players off the bus, but fled the scene when they realized that the bus was carrying a soccer team (and not students that they had presumably been ordered to intercept). The attackers killed a passenger in a nearby taxi and wounded several others.[61]

Back at the site of the first bloody attack on the three buses in the north of Iguala, the Ayotzinapa students had organized a small press conference to denounce the police violence, with local news media and teachers in attendance. At about 12:30 a.m., heavily-armed men in plain black gear approached and began opening fire on the assembled group and the other *normalistas* on the scene.[62] The sudden explosion of weapons fire occurred as one of the students was describing the earlier attack to reporters. People immediately ran for cover, behind the destroyed, abandoned buses, beneath parked cars or in doorways. Whether by design or by luck, just two persons were killed among the wounded.[63] Given that their targets had been caught by

---

[60] Ibid, pp. 79-81.
[61] Ibid, pp. 112-122.
[62] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine,* pp. 118-127.
[63] GIEI, Ayotzinapa I, pp. 96-101.

surprise in the open, the relatively few fatalities suggest that the attackers may have meant to terrorize the assembled group rather than assassinate them.

Most of the students then escaped to safety, hiding overnight until they could gather to report their experiences to state authorities. One Ayotzinapa student was captured in the aftermath, however; his mutilated body was found the next morning not far from the scene, the victim of gruesome torture and the sixth fatality that day in Iguala at the hands of Mexican authorities and/or organized crime.[64]

In contrast to the earlier attacks on the students, the final assault was carried out not by uniformed police, but by a paramilitary-style force without identification on their clothing or vehicles; according to various account and theories, these men were either municipal police in disguise, some military or other special unit, or narco-traffickers (e.g., members of the Guerreros Unidos). Although Mexican state and federal officials and investigators would insist otherwise, the other attacks that evening were carried out by uniformed officers from many different forces, principally members of the Iguala municipal police and municipal police from the neighboring cities of Cocula and Huitzuco, but joined by Guerrero state police, federal police, and members of the Mexican army.[65]

With so many survivors and eyewitnesses to the series of coordinated attacks on the Ayotzinapa students, as well as to the apparently mistaken assault on the bus of soccer players,

---

[64] Ibid, pp. 122-124.
[65] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa II*, pp. 102, 114-115, 121-135.

Mexican authorities largely avoided challenging the basic facts of the attacks themselves. What they did do, however, was immediately work to limit the responsibility for the crimes to local authorities – denying not what happened that night in Iguala, but all evidence of higher-level involvement by the state. To do so, they also put forward motivations for the attacks and explanations for what happened afterwards that were seen by the survivors, families, and other observers as not credible, at best, and intentionally false, at worst.

In assigning blame to local police and narco-traffickers, state and federal authorities also had to provide some rationale or motive for the crimes. As we will see in the following chapter, Mexican authorities sought from the outset to place the blame on local officials and drug traffickers, suppressing evidence that did not fit that narrative. According to their account, Iguala Mayor José Luis Abarca and his wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, supported by the Guerreros Unidos drug cartel, and corrupt municipal police, gave the order to attack the Ayotzinapa students because they feared they were coming to disrupt a political event hosted by Pineda Villa. The police had turned over the missing students to members of the Guerreros Unidos, who mistook them for rival drug traffickers, perhaps from the Los Rojos group. Such claims were not supported by the evidence, however. Pineda Villa's event had concluded by the time the students arrived in the city center, and the idea that drug traffickers would confuse busloads of unarmed students with their rivals seems laughable. The victims' families and their advocates recognized the government's explanations as unbelievable, a view subsequently confirmed by the GIEI.

We may never know with any certainty what happened to the missing Ayotzinapa students or why they were attacked, but the Mexican government's conclusions in late 2014 rang so false and transparently self-serving that it immediately put authorities into conflict with those seeking truth and accountability for the crimes. Moreover, years of government abuses and corruption had conditioned the families and other human rights activists to be deeply suspicious. To nearly all outside of government, one thing about the crimes in Iguala was clear: "*fue el estado*" – "it was the state."

Beyond the conviction that the government was responsible, no fully satisfactory explanation for the events of September 26 has been proposed, neither for the motives for targeting the students, nor for the disappearance of about half their number. Many aspects of the case make no sense, even given the climate of extreme violence and corruption that prevails in the region. Why were the unarmed students – who posed no obvious threat and whose commandeering of buses was a long-tolerated practice – attacked at all? Why did the police and/or criminal organizations decide to attack the buses in the city, rather than wait for them in the countryside, where there would be fewer witnesses? Why were only some students taken, and the rest left alone? Why were the kidnapped students killed, and why did the perpetrators try to ensure that their bodies would never be discovered?

Many theories about the crimes have focused on the buses as the real target of the coordinated attacks. The GIEI noted that U.S. law enforcement had determined that narco-traffickers sometimes used intercity buses to smuggle heroin from Guerrero to the U.S.[66] Noting

[66] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I,* p. 192.

also that early government accounts had omitted references to the Estrella Roja bus and that there were numerous discrepancies in evidence about that bus, the GIEI speculated that the Estrella Roja bus may have contained drugs or money that criminal groups were determined to recover.[67] The Estrella Roja bus, in contrast to the other buses attacked, was emptied of passengers and ordered to continue onward before being intercepted again. In this scenario, the *normalistas* seized the drug traffickers' bus by accident, sending corrupt police forces to scramble to go after every bus matching its profile. However, in that case the police would not have been able to mount such a coordinated operation, involving multiple security forces nearly simultaneously, with practically no advance notice. It also does not explain why some students were taken away and killed, especially given that the Estrella Roja bus and any illicit cargo were recovered without incident.

Other theories look at the two Estrella de Oro buses as a motive. Perhaps, the thinking goes, it was those two buses that the Ayotzinapa students had seized days earlier in Chilpancingo that had been carrying contraband, rather than the Estrella Roja bus. Those buses were the ones most violently attacked by police, and from which the 43 disappeared had been taken – only from those two buses, in fact. Police acting on behalf of drug traffickers could have removed the passengers from those buses to cover up removal of drugs or money that had been hidden on them. Such an explanation accounts for why the police forces could have been prepared to launch a coordinated raid in Iguala, as Mexican security (via a shared C-4 information system) had been tracking the movement of the *normalistas* that day.[68] It does not explain, however, why

[67] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I, Summary*, pp. 18-21.
[68] Ibid, pp. 12-13.

the police and drug traffickers waited until the buses traveled to another city, when they could have seized them at the teachers college or on the road at any time in the previous two days. Neither does it explain why the kidnapped students had to be killed and their bodies hidden or destroyed beyond identification.

Although most accounts emphasize that the practice of commandeering buses was a common practice tolerated by law enforcement, at the same time the Ayotzinapa students were regarded by Mexican authorities as troublesome delinquents, and even a political or security threat. Many ordinary people of Guerrero supported the *normalistas*' efforts and donated freely, and some of the bus drivers reportedly welcomed the opportunity for a break from their regular schedule.[69] Many others, however, regarded the activist, leftist students with suspicion, fear, and hostility, especially within the government and among the social elite. The Ayotzinapa students' marches and protests had often been met with a violent police response. In December 2011, police opened fire on protesting *normalistas*, killing two, and less than a year later, a bus transporting Ayotzinapa students was boarded by armed and masked men, threatening the young men with being "burned alive" if they kept protesting.[70] Guerrero Governor Aguirre publicly denounced the teachers college on numerous occasions, most clearly in a May 2013 television interview, in which he argued that Ayotzinapa "has become a kind of bunker" that neither federal nor state forces can access. "It has become a place that has been used by some groups to indoctrinate these youths and cultivate social resentment amongst them," Guerrero said, maintaining that they are being indoctrinated by "insomniac guerillas."[71] Anabel Hernández

---

[69] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine,* p. 220.
[70] Hernández, pp. 28-32.
[71] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine,* pp. 220-221.

claims that Ayotzinapa was viewed as a security threat at the highest levels of government, and that their political activism in Guerrero ranked among priority "governability" concerns in briefing materials prepared for President Peña Nieto's transition in 2012.[72]

With all this in mind, it is conceivable that the shocking violence deployed against the Ayotzinapa students on September 26 had no clear trigger or motive, other than that the Mexican government chose that time to strike out brutally against a perceived enemy. Certainly, all the forces reported as involved in the attacks, including the military, the federal, state and municipal police, would have been inclined to favor decisive action against the young Marxists and what they viewed as potential future revolutionaries – however unarmed. What still remains unclear, and perhaps forever unknowable, is why the operation took the turn it did, attacking the students in an urban area with many witnesses, and disappearing just half of the group, without a trace.

None of these theories or lines of inquiry were pursued by the Mexican government, which was forced to accept many widely-reported facts about the case but refused to address many fundamental questions. Instead, the authorities offered explanations that were so transparently self-exculpatory and even nonsensical that they provoked outrage among the victims' families and other members of civil society. Even for a people long accustomed to lies and impunity, the state's acknowledgement of a horrific crime, for which it admitted no real responsibility, was too much to bear.

---

[72] Hernández, pp. 33-35.

Chapter 4: Official Obstruction and Cover-Up

The Mexican government approached the crimes committed in Iguala with the clear objectives of evading responsibility and closing the case as quickly as possible, thereby limiting the political damage to the Peña Nieto administration. It did so by perpetrating a cover-up, through a combination of inaction, suppression of evidence, coerced testimony, and misdirection. The state created a narrative aimed at blunting the growing popular demands for accountability and preserving its own longstanding impunity.

Because of the scale of the attacks, in heavily-populated areas with many witnesses and survivors, and especially because of the continued disappearance of several dozen young people, the Mexican government could not simply deny or explain away the crimes, and allow the issue to fade – as it had done so many times in the past. Despite many public assertions of their determination to solve the case and ensure justice, the authorities abandoned meaningful efforts to investigate, instead putting on a show of doing so while working to come up with some explanation that would minimize political damage. Unfortunately for the government, however, its arguments and explanations ran counter to the public's understanding of the local situation, the known facts of the case, and common sense.

Whether intentionally, or because of incompetence and habitual disregard for proper procedure, Mexican authorities at the state and federal level badly bungled their investigations into the crimes, from the very first hours. What could be attributed to sloppiness or negligence, however, particularly by the Guerrero state police handling the initial response, soon

gave way to a sustained, deliberate effort by Mexican authorities to pursue only a line of inquiry that supported the government's interest – including through the use of torture and planting of evidence.

The municipal police that night in Iguala provided no assistance or protection to survivors on the scene. After shooting up the buses and kidnapping roughly half of the students, the police abandoned the locations of the attacks and left the students alone. Following the attack against the three buses in the north of the city, local journalist Rodrigo Montes recalled that, "there was a period of hours during which nothing happened. No authorities arrived at any point. Nobody. When I got there, around eleven-thirty, no authorities were present. The area hadn't been cordoned off. There were no soldiers, no detectives, no police, nobody."[73] The other students, local teachers, and journalists who gathered there were therefore completely vulnerable when masked gunmen attacked the assembled group. Elsewhere, Ayotzinapa students were pursued and shot at by municipal police (and likely others) through the night, as they scattered throughout Iguala neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, no other Mexican authorities came to the aid of the attack victims, despite being alerted to the shootings in multiple locations – not the state police, federal police, state prosecutor's office, nor the army. Federal police who arrived at the scene of the shooting of the soccer team bus outside the city inexplicably failed to aid the wounded. Members of the military interrogated *normalistas* seeking treatment for wounded colleagues in a local private clinic, preventing them from getting medical help there and refusing to call an ambulance as they

---

[73] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine*, p. 123.

expelled them from the premises.[74] Guerrero state police and senior officials received official reports as early as 9:35 p.m. that shootings had taken place in various locations, but not until after midnight did investigators arrive at any of the crime scenes (first at the site of the attack against Estrella de Oro bus 1531, in front of the *Palacio de Justicia*). Authorities did not show up at the site of the attacks on the three buses in the north until 3:20 am, more than five hours after the students were first attacked and many of them kidnapped (and three hours after the second assault during the press conference).[75]

When state investigators finally began to process the crime scenes, they conducted their investigation with a carelessness that reflected both their apparent ineptitude and their motivation – whether on orders or based on understanding of what their superiors expected – to avoid a thorough inquiry that could damage the government. As the review by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' GIEI establishes in detail, neither the Guerrero state-level nor Mexican federal-level investigators adhered to established criminal investigatory practice or to internationally-recognized procedures (among others, the "Minnesota Protocol," the UN's manual for investigating such crimes committed by state actors).[76] The Minnesota Protocol, adopted in 1991 and amended in 2016, reminds states of their obligations to recover and protect physical evidence, interview all potential witnesses, ensure transparency, and strive for effectiveness, independence, and neutrality – while avoiding any "predetermined outcome." States should also consider in many cases the establishment of special commissions of inquiry

---

[74] Ibid, pp. 136-145.
[75] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I,* p. 163.
[76] Ibid, p. 164.

with broad powers to achieve these objectives.[77] Instead, the Mexican government failed to investigate the Iguala attacks and disappearances even by the standards of an ordinary crime, let alone a crime committed by the police in a large-scale, coordinated operation.

That failure to investigate properly included an extraordinary number of violations of standard procedure. The GIEI determined that none of the crime scenes were properly secured and processed, allowing for possible contamination and loss of valuable physical evidence. Investigators did not document the locations thoroughly with photographs and video, they ignored or mixed together ballistic evidence such as shell casings, and they made no attempt to collect blood, hair, and fiber samples. The damaged buses were towed away and not inspected for evidence until fifty days after the crimes. Investigators bagged clothing and other items belonging to the victims, but did not process them as evidence nor share them with their families to confirm their identities. No effort was made for weeks and even months to obtain security camera and other surveillance video footage from the time of the attacks, by which point most was no longer available. In the case of cameras mounted on the courthouse building (*Palacio de Justicia*) directly opposite the scene of the attack on Estrella de Oro bus 1531, recorded footage was "accidently" deleted. Investigators failed to do more than a quick visual inspection of the Iguala police station, and did not review its logs or question on-duty officers and other potential witnesses. They also failed to examine telephone records of the disappeared students.

---

[77] United Nations. *UN Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions*. United Nations, 1991. https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/UN_Manual_on_the_Effective_Prevention_and_Investigation[1].pdf

Questioning of potential witnesses was haphazard at best; the investigators did not even interview the bus drivers until six months after the attacks.[78]

The state's search for the disappeared Ayotzinapa students was similarly flawed, particularly during the first critical hours and days immediately after the attacks. In its review of the actions taken by state investigators, federal police, and the military, the GIEI concluded that the search effort lacked a coherent plan and coordination, failed to adhere to professional guidelines, and consisted mostly of forces patrolling the area looking for students, rather than attempting to determine to where and by whom they had been taken.[79] Guerrero authorities ordered a search for students as early as 3 a.m. the night of the attacks, but police were sent to look for those who had survived the attacks and fled throughout the city – not those that had been kidnapped.[80] Only when parents of the missing students arrived in Iguala the next day asking for the return of sons they assumed were being temporarily held by police somewhere, and after the Ayotzinapa students provided a list of 68 students unaccounted for (later reduced to 57 and then the final 43), did authorities begin a full-scale search for them.

To the casual observer, the government's search for the missing students suggested a lot of activity and significant resources devoted to the effort. Police were dispatched on patrols, the federal highway police set up numerous checkpoints, and helicopters flew overhead to look for the students from the air. But the authorities – whether due to incompetence or by deliberate obstruction – moved too late and too sloppily to do much more than put on a public show of

---

[78] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I*, pp. 160-186.
[79] Ibid, p. 211.
[80] Ibid, p. 213.

action. The GIEI found the government search lacking in many essential aspects. Mexican authorities failed to inform their search by interviewing survivors and family members, analyzing crime scene evidence, reviewing the C-4 integrated government security communications and intelligence logs, or even interrogating the 22 Iguala municipal police who had been detained for their role in the attacks, based on eyewitness identification.[81] The government was looking for the missing students while effectively ignoring evidence that could provide some sense of direction about where to find them.

At the same time that they were bungling the investigation and search, Mexican authorities insisted from the start that the Iguala attacks were a local issue, committed only by municipal police and whose investigation came under the jurisdiction of the Guerrero state. In his first press appearance the day after the attacks, the state prosecutor general, Iñaki Blanco Cabrera, announced that the municipal police had attempted to stop the takeover of buses and "engaged in excessive use of force" against the students. At the same event, Guerrero Secretary General of Government (head of internal security) Jesús Martínez Garnelo stated that there was "no sign" of the presence of higher-level security forces in the crimes (despite eyewitness testimony to the contrary) and that responsibility therefore went to the Iguala mayor and the city's police forces.[82] As Anabel Hernández notes, these initial statements sought to portray the attacks and disappearances as an "open and shut case," with local police bearing "ultimate responsibility." [83] President Peña Nieto reinforced that message, declaring shortly afterwards

---

[81] Ibid, pp. 224-225.
[82] "Reconoce PGJ Guerrero uso excesivo de fuerza en Iguala." *Milenio*, Monterrey, Mexico, September 29, 2014. *Proquest*, http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1566184221?accountid=35635.
[83] Hernández, pp. 58-60.

that, while he "lamented" what had occurred in Iguala, it was up to state-level authorities – not the national government – to handle the case. Federal authorities would coordinate with the Guerrero investigators, Peña Nieto declared, but demanded that "the state government assume its own responsibility," arguing that the national government "cannot replace or assume the responsibilities that correspond strictly to local governments." [84] The Mexican government sent a clear signal that it wanted to limit the investigation and contain the political damage.

With no sign of the missing students and little to show for their investigation, however, pressure grew on the government to demonstrate progress to bring the case to a close. The national attorney general's office finally asserted jurisdiction over the case on October 4, 2014, although the state attorney general's investigation continued in parallel – without proper sharing of case files and evidence until much later, further hampering the inquiry.[85] Indeed, within days of the federal PGR joining the case, Amnesty International criticized the investigation as "chaotic and hostile," lacking coordination and technical expertise – criticism later voiced in greater detail by the GIEI.[86]

Just as the federal government was stepping in, state-level authorities announced that they had obtained confessions from alleged members of the Guerreros Unidos narcotics

---

[84] "Que Aguirre asuma su responsibilidad: Peña." *Milenio*, Monterrey, Mexico, October 1, 2014. *Proquest,* http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1566620563?accountid=35635.
[85] "Atrae PGR caso de normalistas desaparecidos, manda peritos." *El Universal*, Mexico City, October 4, 2014. *Proquest*, http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1585914895?accountid=35635
[86] "Califica Amnistia de "caótica" investigación de caso Iguala." *Milenio*, Monterrery, Mexico, October 10, 2014. *Proquest,* http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1609614645?accountid=35635

trafficking gang, which led them to the buried remains of at least 28 bodies in nearby Pueblo Viejo. Although the timing of the federal intervention seems unusual given those developments, it is possible that the national government either aided the state in securing those confessions, or moved in to "close the deal" and press the state to wrap up its case as quickly as possible. In announcing the confessions and Pueblo Viejo discovery on October 5, Guerrero prosecutor Blanco Cabrera provided a clear explanation of the case, asserting that after kidnapping the Ayotzinapa students, the Iguala municipal police turned them over to Guerreros Unidos members, who then murdered them and disposed of their bodies outside of the city. Blanco Cabrera noted that DNA testing would be required to confirm the identities of the discovered bodies, but expected confirmation within several weeks to two months. Meanwhile, other clandestine burial sites were being investigated and authorities continued their search for Iguala Mayor Abarca, who was still on the run.[87] Unfortunately for the government's efforts to wrap up its case, international forensics experts from the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team – brought into the investigation after sustained appeals from the families and human rights groups – quickly determined that none of the remains recovered at Pueblo Viejo or any other site were those of the missing 43 students.[88]

Both state and federal investigators proceeded in the weeks that followed to round up more suspected Guerreros Unidos members and local municipal police, interrogating them to provide (however often conflicting) information that supported the government's "theory of the

---

[87] "Fiscal: narco mató a normalistas en Iguala." *El Universal*, Mexico City, October 5, 2014. *Proquest*: http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1586057599?accountid=35635
[88] Hernández, pp. 167-168.

case" – that Mayor Albarca had ordered the attacks and drug traffickers killed the missing students, destroying their remains. Mexican Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam and the head of the national Criminal Investigations Agency, Tomás Zerón de Lucio, announced October 22 that authorities had captured one of the leaders of the Guerreros Unidos organization (Sidronio Casarrubias Salgado) days earlier. Murillo Karam maintained that the testimony of those detained and other evidence indicated that the attacks on the Ayotzinapa students were carried out by local police working in conjunction with Guerreros Unidos, "with the intention of preventing a group of people from disrupting the celebratory event to be held by the mayor and his wife on that night in Iguala."[89] (In fact, that event – for a family development program organized by Abarca's wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda – had actually concluded by the time that the *normalistas* arrived in the Iguala city center.) Murillo Karam highlighted Pineda's family ties to the narco-traffickers and her own political ambitions, and reported that the order to attack had come directly from "A-5," the code name for Mayor Abarca. The attorney general maintained that the Guerreros Unidos, for their part, had mistaken the Ayotzinapa students for members of a rival drug gang known as "Los Rojos," and eliminated them to defend their territory."[90]

At this point, the Mexican government had put together a theory that offered a motive (however implausible) for the attacks, but had not yet accounted for what happened to the missing 43. Murillo Karam's intended message was clear: the government's arrests (including 36

---

[89] Ibid, p. 200.
[90] "Imputa PGR a Abarca las desapariciones." *El Universal*, Mexico City, October 22, 2014. *Proquest*: http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1615169189?accountid=35635

municipal police officers and 17 Guerreros Unidos operatives so far) were bringing the case ever nearer to a close.[91] All that remained, from the government's perspective, was to produce evidence of the kidnapped students' deaths.

This last piece the Mexican government secured through coerced testimony from the accused Guerreros Unidos members and local police, and through the likely planting of real physical evidence. In reviewing records of interrogations of suspects, Anabel Hernández found that "each one provided a different version of how the *normalistas* were attacked and taken away, and where they ended up."[92] Pueblo Viejo had been named as a burial site, then disproven, and so the government moved on to other locations offered up by the detained, along with the various other mass graves that turned up in the course of searching by families, experts, and authorities. The nearby hills of La Parota were the focus for a time, until the government investigators finally settled on a trash dump outside the neighboring town of Cocula for their official version. Soon the government would piece together testimony to support an increasingly detailed story centered on the trash dump as the site of the destruction of the victims' remains.

The Mexican government got the answers it wanted from Guerreros Unidos members and municipal police officers through beatings and torture, as has been amply documented by the GIEI and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).[93] [94] The GIEI was

---

[91] "Implican a cártel en desapariciones." *Reforma*, Mexico City, October 18, 2014. *Proquest*: http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1613425866?accountid=35635
[92] Hernández, p. 163.
[93] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa II*, pp. 389-574.
[94] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Double Injustice: report in Human Rights Violations in the Investigation of the Ayotzinapa Case, Executive Summary*.

assisted in its review of medical reports demonstrating post-detention injuries by experts from the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), a non-governmental organization dedicated to assisting torture victims and promoting accountability for such crimes. These reports confirmed in detail that the principal sources of information about the Cocula dump, the burning of the *normalistas*' remains there, and the role of the Iguala and Cocula police in turning the captured students over to the Guerreros Unidos, showed clear signs of abuse and torture while being interrogated by Mexican authorities.[95] Such treatment, though a clear violation of Mexican law, international law (including the Convention Against Torture), and fundamental human rights, remains widespread in Mexico, and – as is often the case – was aimed at securing testimony to fit the investigators' theories about the crime. The detainees, under torture, told Murillo Karam's team what they wanted to hear: that the attacks and murders of the Ayotzinapa students were committed entirely by local authorities, working with narco-traffickers, and that the bodies of those killed were burned beyond all recognition.

But the Mexican government went far beyond beating false confessions out of suspects. Determined to close the case at all costs, federal investigators not only pushed the theory that the students' bodies had been "incinerated completely, due to which even if some remains are discovered, it might be impossible to identify them" (an assertion made even before any physical evidence was discovered),[96] but they arranged to "discover" incinerated human remains, most likely by planting the evidence themselves. On October 29, 2014, government forensics teams,

---

March 15, 2018, pp. 5-7.
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MX/ExecutiveReportMexico_March2018_EN.PDF.
[95] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa II*, p. 392.
[96] Hernández, p. 163.

acting on information allegedly provided by Guerreros Unidos member Agustín García Reyes and others, located black plastic bags containing cremated human bones at the San Juan River not far from the Cocula dump. One of those bone fragments was later positively identified by DNA analysis (via the Argentine team and a laboratory at the University of Innsbruck, Austria) as belonging to Alexander Mora Venancio, one of the missing 43. It eventually came to light, however, that Mexican authorities, led by Tomás Zerón and accompanied by Agustín García Reyes, visited the river site the day before, on October 28, during which time they had ample opportunity to plant evidence, including the bone fragment later confirmed as belonging to one of the victims. (The GIEI presented video footage of that visit to the public in April 2016.) [97] It is not known from where the Mexican government could have obtained the incinerated remains, including the piece definitively tied to the missing students, but all signs point to federal authorities at least having access to such evidence. It was later determined that the remains could not have arrived at the river site as described by the supposed perpetrators, meaning that either the Mexican government knew how they came to be there by some other means, or they put them there themselves.

On November 7, 2014, Mexican Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam held a press conference in which he laid out the government's official version of the crimes. While noting that the investigation would continue and that the 43 students would be considered to be "missing," Murillo Karam presented his findings as conclusive: the students had been attacked by local police forces on orders from Mayor Abarca and those seized were turned over to the Guerreros Unidos, who killed them at the Cocula dump, burned them, and dumped their remains

---

[97] Ibid, p. 235.

in plastic bags in the river. Murillo Karam praised the Mexican government's efforts in "one of the most extensive criminal investigations in recent memory" and a "massive search," "one of the most complex operations in recent times."[98] The attorney general played numerous videos of testimony from the detained Guerreros Unidos members, who maintained that they had piled the bodies of "over 40" students onto a massive pyre of tires, firewood, plastic, ignited by gasoline and diesel fuel, which burned continuously for at least fourteen hours. Murillo Karam took about thirty minutes of questions from skeptical journalists (during which he displayed absolute confidence in his findings and dismissed any suggestion that the military had been involved in the attacks), and then concluded his appearance with the infamous remark, "*ya me cansé*" ("I'm tired," or "I've had enough").[99] A little more than two months later, on January 27, 2015, Murillo Karam declared with apparent finality that this version of events represented "*la verdad histórica*," or the "historical truth" about what happened in Iguala.

In responding to the crimes committed against the Ayotzinapa students and other innocent victims, the Mexican government recognized that the scale and intensity of the public outrage would not allow it to simply ignore them – as it had so many times before. Instead, the state, from President Peña Nieto on down, focused its energies on hampering the investigation, limiting responsibility to local officials and criminals, and offering a narrative that might convince the public to accept the deaths, and move on. Unfortunately for the authorities, few

[98] González Rodríguez, pp. 128, 138.
[99] "Ya me cansé" y otras claves de la conferencia de Murillo Karam." *El Informador*, Guadalajara, Mexico, November 7, 2014. https://www.informador.mx/Mexico/Ya-me-canse-y-otras-claves-de-la-conferencia-de-Murillo-Karam-20141107-0043.html

were persuaded by this evident cover-up, and the people's demands for justice and an end to impunity grew only stronger.

Chapter 5: Civil Society and International Responses

The public response to the attacks in Iguala, the Mexican authorities' evident complicity, and the subsequent official cover-up, was historic in scope and intensity, marking a transformation in civil society's and the wider world's approaches to human rights in Mexico. Six years after the events of 2014, Ayotzinapa ranks with the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre as a landmark event in modern Mexican history, and the impact of the human rights response to those events continues to wield an outsized influence today. That response began and has been sustained by the unwavering determination of the victims' families to obtain justice, and, most of all, to locate their missing sons. The families were joined in their cause by allies at home and abroad, in mounting protests, raising public awareness, applying pressure on the Mexican government, and exposing the official version of events as a lie – perhaps most effectively through the work of the IACHR's independent expert group (GIEI). Rather than yield to the power of the state and resign themselves to official impunity, as had long been the grim tradition in such cases, the parents of the 43 and Mexico's civil society fought back, boldly demanding accountability and respect for their fundamental human rights.

In the very first hours after the attacks and disappearances of the Ayotzinapa students, there was considerable confusion among the family members, other students, journalists, and others. Most assumed, or prayed, that those taken away were being held somewhere by the authorities, and that they would soon be released. Perhaps they were in hiding, and would eventually reappear at the school or at home, as a dozen or so did the following day. Many of the parents were sufficiently alarmed to go immediately to Iguala in search of their sons, to either

secure their release from custody or locate them in the city themselves.[100] The family members were joined by local teachers and other students in confronting state authorities in Iguala, demanding – in vain – information about the whereabouts of the missing. Fearing reprisals or some "new aggression," most decided to leave the city that first day following the attacks and regroup to the grounds of the school in Ayotzinapa, which became their base of operations going forward.[101]

Even as the attacks in Iguala were underway and before the scale of the government's crimes became clear, the Ayotzinapa students themselves launched into action to defend their rights. They called their fellow classmates back at the school to come and provide support. While en route to Iguala, those students drew on their network of contacts with local schools and news media to sound the alarm and organize an impromptu press event at the scene of the attacks on the three buses in the north of the city.[102] They ignored police warnings to disperse, deciding instead to stand guard over the crime scene and preserve physical evidence of the shootings, including the shell casings that littered the street.[103] Soon they were joined by local teachers and journalists, who were attacked together with the students when masked gunmen showed up and opened fire during the on-scene press briefing.

"About twenty of us from the CETEG (the local teachers union) arrived little by little to help the students from Ayotzinapa," recalled Pedro Cruz Mendoza, an Iguala-based teacher.

---

[100] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine,* pp. 186-190, 213-214.
[101] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I*, p. 215-216.
[102] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine*, p. 96.
[103] Ibid, p. 116.

Cruz stated that they were present for about two hours, with no official authorities at the site, until the sound of automatic weapons fire caused everyone to flee for cover.[104] CETEG members accompanied the surviving students through much of the night, offering some of them shelter in their members' homes as police patrols pursued the *normalistas*. Local teachers, students and alumni mobilized to come to the aid of their Ayotzinapa colleagues, both in solidarity and through personal connections, and were instrumental in getting journalists on the scene quickly as possible.[105]

La Jornada's Sergio Ocampo reported that he and other journalists based in the state capital were called to a press conference by FUNE, a teachers college alumni activist group, almost immediately after the first attacks. Upon hearing about the shootings, Ocampo and a group of about thirty reporters, teachers, and students decided to set out for Iguala in a caravan just before midnight that night. Along the way, one of the newspaper reporters had gotten word from his office that it was not safe to go to Iguala. Undeterred, Ocampo said he replied that, "precisely because it is not safe to go to Iguala, we need to go and find out what's happening." [106] Ocampo's account of the attacks the following day was among the first in national news outlets, testament not only to his professionalism and personal courage, but also to those of so many of his colleagues and activists.

The story of the attacks in Iguala was sensational even by Mexico's violent standards. The news of what happened the night of September 26 and subsequent reporting on the

[104] Ibid, pp. 119-121.
[105] Ibid, p. 115.
[106] Ibid, p. 162.

disappearances were quickly taken up by national and international outlets, and within days the Mexican public and many around the world had become aware of the crimes and of the evident complicity of the authorities. In doing their jobs as professional journalists and members of civil society – assembling facts and testimony and publicizing these crimes – Mexican and foreign news media confronted the real risk of physical violence and official reprisals. That risk was underscored by the attack on the street press conference in Iguala, but it accompanied the journalists in the weeks, months, and years afterwards, as they investigated possible perpetrators and gave coverage to public protests. Mexico was and remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Thirty-seven journalists were killed in Mexico in just the five years leading up to the Ayotzinapa case; another forty-nine would be killed in the following six years, with many others subjected to violent attacks and intimidation.[107]

The families of the missing *normalistas* quickly learned that their sons were not being held in any kind of normal custody by the police or the military. Many continued to believe that they had been taken away but were still being held somewhere, alive. Indeed, that belief remains very strong among the families even to this day. But in the days immediately after the attacks, the families recognized that they were no longer confronting a situation in which the authorities were holding the students with the intention of releasing them soon. Rather, the focus shifted to demanding that the government give up their illegally-held prisoners, if they were alive, and in any case explain what had happened to them. The families and volunteers continued their search

---

[107] Committee to Protect Journalists. Online database. https://cpj.org/data/?status=Killed&start_year=2009&end_year=2020&group_by=location&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker. Accessed October 2, 2020.

for the missing, including in the scores of clandestine burial sites discovered by those fearing the worst. The also turned to the public and the international community for support, joined by allies in the student groups, unions, and local human rights organizations.

Among the human rights organizations that came to the aid of the Ayotzinapa families were the Guerrero-based "Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña Tlachinollan" ("Tlachinollan Human Rights Center") and the "Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez" (a Mexico City-based human rights organization known colloquially as "Centro Prodh"), both of which offered legal and public relations advice, and represented the families in communications with the government and international organizations. Activists from Tlachinollan, a center dedicated to the state's indigenous population, had been working closely with the Raúl Isidro Burgos school since an attack on Ayotzinapa students in 2011 that resulted in two deaths.[108] As noted in Chapter 1, representatives from the Centro Prodh were already in the area on an unrelated case when they became aware of the events in Iguala and sought out the victims and their families.

These local human rights defenders had been engaged for decades in providing legal assistance to Mexican citizens seeking accountability from the government for abuses or denial of access to services, and offering support in raising public awareness about injustices. Some, like the Centro Prodh, are national in scope but active in taking on high-profile or worthy cases,

---

[108] Aguilar, Maria Luisa. "Las familias no les piden atención psicológica, sino que se pongan a buscar a sus hijos." Interview by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. October 27, 2014. https://mx.boell.org/es/2014/10/27/las-familias-no-les-piden-atencion-psicologica-sino-que-se-pongan-buscar-sus-hijos

while others have been focused on marginalized regions or communities, as with Tlachinollan in the remote, mountainous area of northern Guerrero. With modest resources and staffing supplemented by international donors, human rights organizations in Mexico have performed invaluable service, often in hostile or dangerous environments. Two years before the Iguala attacks, Tlachinollan lawyer Vidulfo Rosales Sierra received death threats for his work with the Ayotzinapa school and was forced to flee the country (he has since returned and now represents the families of the missing).[109]

In his report on his country visit to Mexico in 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders declared that he was "dumbfounded by the extreme violence [and] the climate of near-absolute impunity," but lauded the "resilience of human rights defenders and their courage in seeking truth, justice and reparation."[110] A 2012 Mexican law establishing a protection mechanism for human rights defenders and journalists has been ineffective, he found, citing many hundreds of cases of violence and harassment each year that are not addressed by the state. The situation of Centro Prodh and Tlachinollan was singled out in the UN report as "particularly worrying," as those organizations face accusations, harassment, and other reprisals for their work on enforced disappearances.[111] They and the family members of the disappeared they accompany carry out searches and other activities "at great risk to their

---

[109] Cabrera, Carlos. "Denuncian amenazas contra defensor de normalistas." *El Universal*, May 23, 2012. https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/849223.html

[110] United Nations, General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on his mission to Mexico*. A/HRC/37/51/Add.2, February 12, 2018, p. 18. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/037/94/PDF/G1803794.pdf?OpenElement

[111] Ibid, p. 9.

own security," the UN emphasized.[112] Those efforts had been already been underway for more than two years by the time of the Special Rapporteur's visit, and continue to the present day.

As the news of the missing *normalistas* and the authorities' role in their enforced disappearance spread, the public became outraged, and diverse elements of civil society took to the streets and the airwaves to protest the attacks and demand the return of the missing, alongside their distraught and angry parents. Ayotzinapa students and teachers, colleagues from other teachers colleges and their unions, labor union activists, and human rights organizations accompanied the parents in staging outdoor protests and blockades of highways around the state capital within days of the attacks. On September 30, 2014, protesters marched in Chilpancingo, Iguala, and Acapulco, demanding the return of the missing and the firing of Governor Aguirre and Iguala Mayor Abarca. In Chilpancingo, students, teachers, and parents assembled in front of the state legislature and burned Aguirre, Abarca and President Peña Nieto in effigy. They chanted, "*Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos*!" ("They took them alive, we want them alive"), a traditional slogan for the missing that became a longstanding feature of all future protests and advocacy, to the present day. Before moving on, the *normalistas* (but not the parents or the teachers, according to press accounts) broke windows and the doors of the congressional offices.[113]

---

[112] Ibid, p. 5.
[113] Guerrero, Jesús. "Exigen la destitución de Gobernador y Edil." *El Norte*, September 30, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1566324074/E39EA24823C54D07PQ/43?accountid=35635#center

As the issue of Ayotzinapa was taken up by thousands of protesters at the Tlatelolco anniversary October 2 in Mexico City – the very event for which the missing *normalistas* had been commandeering buses when they were attacked in Iguala – an estimated 10,000 people joined the families in marches and street actions in Guerrero. Led by Ayotzinapa students and teachers, protesters used 30 buses to block the highway between the state capital and Acapulco for more than five hours. Feeling the pressure of the growing publicity and violence, Mexican interior ministry officials announced that they would soon meet with parents of the missing.[114] The following day, Governor Aguirre agreed to meet with a delegation of the parents in his office in Chilpancingo, an encounter that was marked by desperation and outrage from the parents and apparent indifference from the governor.

One of the most outspoken of the parents, Mario César González, recalled that he lambasted Aguirre for the state's failure to locate their sons, and for lying to them. González said that he told the governor that the parents only wanted to find their children, angrily charging that, "it's lucky it's not his son, because in half an hour they would have found him."[115] Aguirre maintained that the authorities had been searching, admitted he had no answers, and signaled his impatience with the parents' demands. Afterwards, scoffing at the million-peso reward Aguirre had offered to find the missing students (approximately $75,000) as a "mockery," González declared that "a million pesos gets him [Aguirre] drunk. That's what one of his drinking binges

[114] EFE, Spanish News Agency. "Miles de personas reclaman vivos a estudiantes desaperecidos en sur de Mexico." October 3, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1566948338/914EF13380554B5APQ/112?accountid=35635#center

[115] Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine*, p. 200.

costs."[116] Those sentiments directed at the governor reflected not only the anger and frustration of the parents at the seizure of their sons, but also a profound sense of class and racial discrimination by the state against the poor and mostly indigenous families. Two days later, President Peña Nieto addressed the Ayotzinapa disappearances publicly for the first time (some ten days after the fact), declaring that he was "shocked" by the situation and pledged to the skeptical nation that there will be "no impunity."[117]

The protests, meanwhile, continued to grow, as up to 30,000 people filled the center of Mexico City October 8, joined by demonstrations in at least 25 other Mexican states and in world capitals such as London, Berlin, and Madrid – usually in front of Mexico's embassies there. The families of the disappeared led the march carrying photographs of their sons on their chests and backs, and receiving support from bystanders, who shouted, "we are with you." Many of them addressed the crowd, with one father, Tanis Mendoza, declaring that "what has kept us strong is courage...and that is how we will continue until our children appear." Another parent, Melitón Ortega, said that, "we are desperate that our children are missing, murdered, and seriously injured. We are in great pain." The parents were joined by a broad coalition of teachers, students, union activists, human rights defenders and other activists, foremost in number the national teachers' union CNTE, with many years of experience in organizing large crowds of protesters in the capital.[118]

---

[116] Ibid, p. 204.
[117] BBC News. "Mexico missing students: 'No impunity' vows Pena Nieto." *bbc.com*, October 6, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-29515556
[118] Solera, Claudia, and Juan Pablo Reyes. "Claman por desaparecidos; marchan miles en México y otros países." *Excelsior*, October 9, 2014. https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2014/10/09/985874

Up to that point, as Anabel Hernández observes, the Mexican government had shown little real interest in engaging with the Ayotzinapa activists, but now "alarm bells were ringing in President Peña Nieto's administration."[119] Interior Minister Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong received parents of the 43 missing students on October 10, 2014, accompanied by their legal representatives from Centro Prodh and Tlachinollan. The parents were blunt with the interior minister. "The first thing we want to say is, we don't trust you," they told Osorio Chong, according to Hernández's reporting. They demanded the return of their sons and accused the Mexican military of participating in the attacks. They blamed the federal government for waiting until October 5 to get involved in the investigation. Osorio Chong, for his part, feigned ignorance of the attacks that night (although he admitted before Congress a year later that he had been kept apprised of events throughout), and maintained that, "we are as upset as you are, we condemn the actions as much as you do." [120] It was not a convincing presentation.

Three days later, Ayotzinapa students, teachers, CETEG teachers' union activists, and parents laid siege to Guerrero state government offices in Chilpancingo. They clashed with riot police, broke down the doors of the state capitol building, and held some 3,800 employees hostage within for about five hours. The state's human rights commission head managed to negotiate the release of the detainees, after which the protesters ransacked offices and set fire to the building. At roughly the same time, "dissident" teachers reportedly detonated an explosive device in the nearby city hall, which also caught fire. Despite police reinforcements, the

[119] Hernández, p. 151.
[120] Ibid, p. 153.

protesters managed to escape in their buses. Incredibly, no injuries were reported, but the fire damage to multiple government offices was severe.[121] Such intense violence by the Ayotzinapa demonstrators was infrequent; their protests were largely peaceful, and aimed at both pressuring the government and building popular support for their cause. Still, the Chilpancingo events were not an isolated incident, as ten days later demonstrators ransacked and set fire to Iguala's city hall as well.[122] Governor Aguirre was forced to resign by his PRD party's national leadership that same day, on October 23, 2014.[123]

The mass marches and demonstrations in Mexico City and other cities throughout the country and abroad continued to grow throughout October and November 2014, reaching an estimated 45,000 in the national capital as part of a "Day of Global Action" on October 22, which also featured a nationwide student strike.[124] One of the biggest rallies took place a month later, on November 20, in another "Day of Global Action" that brought as many as 100,000 into the streets of Mexico City, with marches and blockades taking place throughout the country and many cities around the world, in what *The Guardian* described as a "watershed moment."[125] The

---

[121] Pigeonutt, Vania. "Guerrero: queman Palacio de Gobierno." *El Universal*, October 14, 2014. https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2014/guerrero-queman-palacio-de-gobierno-1045855.html

[122] Chouza, Paula. "Una protesta en Iguala termina con el incendio del Palacio Municipal." *El Pais*, October 23, 2014. https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/10/22/actualidad/1414005121_031793.html

[123] Wilkinson, Tracy. "Mexico governor steps down over missing students." *Los Angles Times*, October 23, 2014. https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-governor-steps-down-missing-students-20141023-story.html

[124] "Miles marchan en México para exigir regreso de 43 estudiantes desaparecidos." *El Nuevo Diario*, October 22, 2014. https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/internacionales/332974-miles-marchan-mexico-exigir-regreso-43-estudiantes/

[125] Tuckman, Jo. "Mexicans in biggest protest yet over missing students." *The Guardian*, November 21, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/21/mexicans-protesting-about-missing-students-scuffle-with-police

protest in the capital that day was headed by the Ayotzinapa families, but included thousands of students, workers, academics, activists, and ordinary people fed up with impunity and corruption. In addition to the common slogans, such as “It was the state” and “I’ve had enough” (recalling Murillo Karam’s infamous remark weeks earlier), one banner read, “What can a country harvest if it sows bodies?”[126] The missing Ayotzinapa students had become a symbol of the country’s political and human rights crisis, and of popular indignation about the corruption of the Mexican government – Peña Nieto’s above all.

In an attempt to manage the growing political threat, the Mexican president met with the families of the missing at the presidential palace in Mexico City on October 29. The encounter did not go much better than previous such meetings between senior officials and the parents. First-hand accounts of the meeting with Peña Nieto noted the disparity between the elegantly dressed president and his team, all keeping an eye on their cell phones while the parents spoke, and the campesino families, some of whom borrowed clothes for the meeting and whose command of Spanish was weak. The president removed his tie as a gesture of informality, but still engaged the assembled group with what the parents saw as empty rhetoric, “more political theater than open dialogue.”[127] “What is it that you want?” Peña Nieto asked, to which the families responded, “All we want are our missing sons.” “That I cannot give you. But a search is underway,” the president replied.[128] At this, the parents began to shout that the police and the government were the ones who had taken them away, and they signaled, as Peña Nieto soon left

[126] Ibid.
[127] Maldonado, *Faces of the Disappeared*, pp. 24-25.
[128] Ibid, p. 27.

the room, that they would not leave the presidential palace until the government agreed to a signed statement concerning their demands.[129]

After nearly six hours with the president's team, including Osorio Chong and Murillo Karam, the families departed with a ten-point agreement that committed the government to general and vaguely-worded actions, such as intensifying the search, ending impunity, recognizing grievances, and agreeing in principle to a commission to share information. The family members made it clear afterwards that they were very dissatisfied. One father, Nicolás Andrés Juan, dismissed the meeting as "more of the same," with no new information, while another, Epifanio Álvarez, was quoted as saying that it seemed to them that the government was simply "making fun of them."[130]

The final point of the agreement signed at the presidential palace was for the government to expedite technical assistance from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). As María Luisa Aguilar of Centro Prodh recalled, the Mexican human rights defenders assisting the families recognized within days of the Iguala attacks and disappearances they would need to call on international organizations for support.[131] Centro Prodh and the Tlachinollan Center, together with a third human rights group, appealed to the IACHR on September 30, 2014 for *medidas cautelares* ("provisional remedies," an order or injunction issued to the state for relief and protection), which the IACHR granted on October 3. The

---

[129] Ibid, p. 29.
[130] Baranda, Antonio and Luis Fernando Lozano. "Reprochan a Peña falta de resultados." *El Norte*, October 30, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1618174783/973CE9D69EC14813PQ/54?accountid=35635
[131] Aguilar, María Luisa. Personal interview. November 5, 2020.

IACHR's order recognized the gravity and urgency of the situation and directed the Mexican government to take all necessary measures to investigate the situation, locate and protect the missing students, as well as the injured students, and report on actions taken.[132] Additionally, at the same time the human rights defenders secured approval for the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team to work on the case, to ensure the identification of human remains that were being located in gravesites around Iguala; few had confidence in the Mexican authorities' technical capabilities, nor trusted them in any case.[133]

After weeks of sustained public pressure from the families and human rights groups, and repeated suggestions that it would welcome outside help, the Mexican government finally formally requested technical assistance in the investigation from the IACHR on October 31, 2014.[134] Human rights defenders understood that the Mexican government "couldn't say no," as María Luisa Aguilar noted, but expected that it would follow its traditional course of agreeing to a course of action, and then "do everything possible to make it not happen."[135] In fact, the government tried its best to complete its cover-up and establish its version of events (the "historical truth") before the IACHR group could establish itself and begin work on the ground, which took four months. Although Mexican authorities almost certainly underestimated the impact that the GIEI would eventually have, perhaps expecting that the eminent international

---

[132] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Resolución 28/2014, Medida cautelar No. 409-14*, October 3, 2014. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/pdf/2014/MC409-14-ES.pdf
[133] Aguilar, personal interview.
[134] Hernández, Jaime. "México solicita ayuda a CIDH por Ayotzinapa." *El Universal*, October 31, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1618335160/B4755D20BFAE4836PQ/38?accountid=35635
[135] Aguilar, personal interview.

experts on the team would not be as thorough and dogged as they turn out to be, they still dragged their heels, only reaching final agreement with the OAS on the mission November 18.

The OAS, for its part, did not move as quickly as it could have, either, finalizing its group on January 30, 2015. Still, the IACHR used that time to assemble a serious, independent group of five distinguished experts: Carlos Martín Beristain, a Spanish expert on victims and survivors of violence (and a medical doctor); Angela Buitrago, a Colombian prosecutor and law professor, with experience in forced disappearance cases; Francisco Cox Vial, a Chilean human rights lawyer; Claudia Paz y Paz, a former Guatemalan attorney general and expert in criminal law; and Alejandro Valencia Villa, a Colombian human rights lawyer with significant UN and OAS experience.[136] The GIEI began preliminary work on the case in Washington, before making its first visit to Mexico March 1-19, 2015.

Although the GIEI experienced a delay of several months in beginning its work, it was aided by the work of Mexican human rights organizations, who work diligently in those months to review and help organize case files and evidence. Santiago Aguirre of Prodh and his team helped lay the groundwork for the GIEI's investigation, accessing government records of the official investigation and flagging key issues for the international team. Prodh and Tlachinollan were also instrumental in drawing on their established relationships with the Ayotzinapa families, assuring them that the GIEI could be trusted from the very start.[137]

---

[136] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Press Release 008/15, Interdisciplinary Group of Experts to Launch at IACHR Headquarters its Work on the Case of the Students of Ayotzinapa, Mexico*. OAS, January 30, 2015. http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2015/008.asp
[137] Aguilar, personal interview.

The mandate of the IACHR experts was to follow up on the *medidas cautelares* it had issued in early October, to verify and assess the actions taken by the Mexican government with respect to its investigation, search for the missing, forensic work, and human rights protections for victims, and to provide recommendations to the state. The importance of looking at all lines of investigation, including links between organized crime and state actors, was stated explicitly in the signed agreement of November 18. The Mexican government pledged to provide the GIEI with access to its files, resources, people, and facilities, and would guarantee its physical safety and immunity from prosecution. The GIEI's mission was set for an initial six months, subject to an extension of time as necessary to fulfill its objectives.[138] Although described as "technical assistance," it was clear that the independent experts would be coming to evaluate the Mexican government's failure to investigate the case properly. As IACHR Executive Secretary Emilio Álvarez Icaza observed at the signing event, "this is a key moment in the contemporary history of Mexico, since it represents an opportunity to attack the root of this structural problem that has represented a tragedy for each of the thousands of victims of forced disappearances that have taken place in recent years, for their family, for their loved ones and for all Mexico."[139]
From the perspective of the Ayotzinapa families and Mexican civil society, the GIEI represented their best hope for getting at the truth and bringing accountability and justice.

---

[138] Organization of American States and the Government of Mexico. *Acuerdo para la incorporación de asistencia técnica desde la perspectiva de los derechos humanos de la desaparición forzada de 43 estudiantes de la Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa, etc.* OAS, November 18, 2014. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/mandato/docs/Acuerdo-Addendum-Mexico-CIDH.pdf
[139] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Press Release 136/14, IACHR Makes Official Technical Cooperation Agreement About Ayotzinapa Students in Mexico*. OAS, November 18, 2014. http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2014/136.asp

The faith and hope of the families were not misplaced. Throughout their mandate, the GIEI members poured through case files, pulled together evidence from the deliberately fragmented official investigations, highlighted inconsistencies, re-evaluated evidence, heard accounts from survivors and other witnesses never before interviewed, and produced a damning indictment of the Mexican government's response. The GIEI, effectively, exposed the "historical truth" as a lie.

In a preliminary report on May 11, 2015, the IAHRC team of independent experts announced that they had established that Mexican authorities were aware of the *normalistas*' movements and actions the night of the attack and that the purported motive for moving against them (that they intended to disrupt an event held by the Iguala mayor's wife) was false. They reported on the government's failure to conduct a proper investigation and to protect the victims. The GIEI emphasized that the crimes in question were not simple kidnapping, as the government charged, but forced disappearance (an important distinction in law, as state actors are the perpetrators), torture, attempted murder, and obstruction of justice. They also confirmed testimony that indicated that federal and state police were on the scene and, at a minimum, facilitated the attacks.[140]

With the publication of its 519-page report at the conclusion of their initial mission on September 6, 2015, the GIEI produced a highly detailed and comprehensive narrative of the

---

[140] Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Third Visit of the Interdisciplinary Group of Experts to Mexico: First Findings and Specific Recommendations*. OAS, May 11, 2015. https://prensagieiayotzi.wixsite.com/giei-ayotzinapa/single-post/2015/05/11/Third-visit-of-the-Interdisciplinary-Group-of-Independent-Experts-to-Mexico-First-findings-and-specific-recommendations

Iguala attacks and disappearances, directly challenging many critical aspects of the government's official version of events. Building on their preliminary findings, the experts identified grave deficiencies in the government's investigations, as reviewed in Chapter 4, including failure to pursue alternative lines of investigation (such as the involvement of state and federal officials, and the military, as well as a connection to narcotics trafficking as a possible motive for the attack), and determined that the government's conclusions did not square with the facts. The GIEI found levels of organization and coordination in the attacks that were inconsistent with other criminal cases (pointing to a leading role for the state in the crimes), established that state security forces were directly involved, and dismissed the official theory that the *normalistas* had been attacked at the mayor's order and then killed after being mistaken for rival gangs.

Perhaps most damning, the GIEI concluded that the waste dump at Cocula could not have been the scene of the crime, based on expert testimony that a fire of the magnitude needed to incinerate 43 bodies was, without question, physically impossible in that location and in such a short length of time.[141] In other words, the Mexican government had botched the investigation and search, almost certainly to cover up its complicity, and the official version of events that it had come up with was demonstrably false. Francisco Goldman attended the report presentation, and wrote that, "it would be hard to overstate what a *demolishment* it was of the Mexican government's official account." "The report was historic," he wrote, "not just because it was the first time that the Mexican government had acquiesced to such an intrusion by foreigners on its authority, but...it was also the first time Mexicans had ever seen a real criminal investigation,

---

[141] GIEI, *Ayotzinapa I, Summary*, pp. 7-28.

conducted by independent and autonomous justice professionals rather than by those subservient to a possibly complicit government."[142]

There had been some hope at the first GIEI report's release – just short of a year after the attacks in Iguala – that the Mexican government might, however reluctantly, confront its mistakes and move forward with a credible investigation, working together with the GIEI as its mandate was extended for an additional six months. Murillo Karam had been fired in February of that year, some of the investigate units responsible for the cover-up had been sidelined, and the GIEI had presented a thorough, persuasive account based on the known facts, repudiating the government while still emphasizing its commitment to work with Mexican authorities to make things right.[143]

Unfortunately, it soon became clear that the Peña Nieto government's approach to working with the GIEI had instead hardened. The authorities continued to deny the independent experts access to the Mexican military, even as evidence mounted that the 27th Battalion, stationed in the heart of Iguala, played a significant, if not leading, role in the attacks. Through its contacts and surrogates in the national news media, the government sought to discredit GIEI members publicly, accusing them of malfeasance and of being engaged in human rights violations and corruption in their own countries. Mexican law enforcement officials then suggested that they would investigate such charges, despite their evident fabrication and the

---

[142] Goldman, "Mexico's Missing Forty-Three."
[143] Goldman, Francisco. "The Missing Forty-Three: The Mexican Government Sabotages Its Own Independent Investigation." *The New Yorker*, April 22, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-missing-forty-three-the-mexican-government-sabotages-its-own-independent-investigation

immunity the GIEI enjoyed under the terms of its agreement.[144] In April 2016, three UN special rapporteurs joined in denouncing the "defamation campaigns" against GIEI and other human rights defenders and called on Mexico to end the harassment.[145] GIEI members concluded their second six-month mandate by observing that the Mexican government had effectively ended its cooperation with them. "The conditions to conduct our work don't exist," Claudia Paz y Paz was quoted as saying. "The proof is that the government opposed the extension of our mandate."[146] Later, the GIEI revealed that the Mexican government had used sophisticated spyware to monitor their investigations and the activities of other human rights defenders, presumably without a legal court order.[147]

At the April 24, 2016 presentation of their second major report documenting the Mexican government's human rights violations, the GIEI members summarized their findings to the assembled crowd in Mexico City – which did not include invited government representatives, who declined to attend. They highlighted video evidence that authorities (no less than chief investigator Tomás Zerón) had planted human remains at the river site where they were supposedly "discovered" the next day, demonstrating not only a false narrative but the planting

[144] Ibid.
[145] Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. "UN Experts Urge Mexico to Counter Current Smear Campaigns and Openly Support Right Defenders." United Nations, ohchr.org, April 6, 2016. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19784&LangID=E
[146] Ahmed, Azam and Paulina Villegas. "Investigators Say Mexico Has Thwarted Efforts to Solve Students' Disappearance." *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/world/americas/investigators-say-mexico-has-thwarted-efforts-to-solve-students-disappearance.html
[147] Ahmed, Azam. "Spyware in Mexico Targeted Investigators Seeking Students." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/world/americas/mexico-missing-students-pegasus-spyware.html

of physical evidence that the government had in its possession. The GIEI members expressed deep regret that they had not been allowed by the government to extend their mandate further. Holding placards with photos of their missing sons, family members in attendance shouted at the GIEI not to leave. A few days later, the families and the Ayotzinapa community held an emotional farewell for the GIEI team on the school's grounds, where the members were covered in flower garlands and again tearfully urged not to go. "Because of you, the farce that the government created has collapsed," declared Ciriaco Vázquez, one of the fathers. "You are leaving now, but be assured that we will continue in the fight until the truth is exposed and our colleagues return to us," said one of the surviving *normalistas*.[148] The work of the GIEI was also hailed in a joint statement by five UN special rapporteurs, who declared that the final report "shows serious deficiencies in the justice system and a worrying weakness of the state to investigate with due diligence human rights violations and the sophisticated level of coordination of some authorities in the commission of crimes." The UN officials regretted the Mexican government's lack of support, but maintained that the GIEI had "fully vindicated the rights of victims" in the case.[149] The IACHR announced a special follow-up mechanism, which would try to sustain the GIEI's progress, however from a distance.

Although the street protests peaked in size and intensity in November and December 2014, the families of the missing and their allies sustained demonstrations and public outreach,

---

[148] Guerrero, Jesús and Cesar Martínez. "'No se vayan'." *Reforma*, April 28, 2016. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1784759882/fulltext/296BA0D7CACB4E89PQ/7?accountid=35635

[149] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Mexico: 'Much remains to be done to deliver truth and justice in the Ayotzinapa case' – UN experts." United Nations, ohchr.org, April 26, 2016. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19883&LangID

into the following year and through to the present day. As María Luisa Aguilar of Centro Prodh noted, the families have been the driving force throughout, showing great resilience and giving the movement focus. Despite most not knowing each other at first and coming from often very different backgrounds, and with varying abilities to dedicate their time and effort, the Ayotzinapa families have drawn strength from being together, she observed. Over the years, the numbers of those families actively engaged in protests and advocacy have gone up and down, but Aguilar reported that for larger events and meetings, even in 2020, they still manage to have about thirty families participating – often people of modest means who have to travel far from isolated communities to make their voices heard in the capital.[150]

Just as the GIEI was beginning its work in March 2015, a number of family members and human rights defenders organized an extraordinary tour through the United States to raise awareness of their cause and strengthen relationships with social justice and Mexican-American groups to the north. Roughly sixteen parents and students devoted six weeks to traveling along three different routes within the U.S., coordinating with local partners in cities along the west coast, central U.S. and the east coast, and joining together in Washington and New York at the end. "Caravan 43" allowed family members to build support for their cause with a wide range of sympathetic audiences in each location, garnering local press coverage and expressions of solidarity.[151][152] Although a modest effort in terms of scale, the caravan was successful in reaching important groups. The family members met with members of the Congressional

150 Aguilar, personal interview.
151 "About Caravana 43." Caravana43.org. http://www.caravana43.com/about.html
152 "Ayotzinapa 43 Caravan Information." Global Exchange, globalexchange.org, March 17, 2015. https://globalexchange.org/2015/03/17/ayotzinapa-43-caravan-information/

Hispanic Caucus, lobbied congressional and administration officials, secured a city council resolution of support in Austin, participated in the 14th session of the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and met with UN officials in New York.[153] Among the messages the families delivered on their U.S. tour was an appeal to cut anti-narcotics funding to the Mexican military and police, through the U.S. government's Merida Initiative program. Citing human rights concerns, and with Ayotzinapa mentioned as a major contributing factor, the U.S. government did cut funding – however slightly, by $5 million – in October 2015.[154] Despite voicing concerns about Ayotzinapa and other human rights cases, however, the U.S. demonstrated reluctance to take stronger measures when weighing those concerns against urgent (however ill-considered) priorities in trying to stem the flow of illegal drugs and related crime from Mexico.

Despite the Peña Nieto government's best efforts to escape accountability for Ayotzinapa and encourage the country to move on, Mexican civil society and the international community ensured that the case would not be abandoned. Although the missing had not been located and the perpetrators of the crime had not yet been brought to justice, the state's crimes and its cover-up had been exposed. After years of appeals and legal motions from human rights defenders, a Mexican federal court on May 31, 2018 issued a sweeping order condemning the government's investigation of the case and ordering a new one, this time under the supervision of a truth commission to include family members of the victims. Even those involved in pursuing the

---

153 Fleury, Hannah. "Ayotzinapa Comes to New York City." *SocialistWorker.org*, April 30, 2015. https://socialistworker.org/2015/04/30/ayotzinapa-comes-new-york-city

154 Malkin, Elisabeth and Azam Ahmed. "U.S. Withholds $5 Million in Antidrug Aid to Mexico as Human Rights Rebuke." *The New York Times,* October 19, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/20/world/americas/us-withholds-5-million-in-antidrug-aid-to-mexico-over-human-rights.html

appeals appeared surprised by the scale of their legal victory. "I can't think of a precedent for this," a lawyer for Centro Prodh was quoted as saying.[155] The Ayotzinapa team issued a statement declaring that the decision "confirms that the truth of the Ayotzinapa case has not been told, the whereabouts of the victims are unknown, and that the current federal administration committed multiple irregularities in the investigation. These conclusions, already made by international bodies, have now been established by a national tribunal."[156]

With the court decision to re-open the case, Peña Nieto on his way out, and the likely next president – Andres Manuel López Obrador, who would win election at the end of the year – already committed to fulfilling the new mandate to investigate the crimes thoroughly, the Ayotzinapa families and their allies had reason to feel that they had prevailed, at least in mounting a resistance. Although the likelihood diminished each year that even the remains of their missing sons would be found, the families had ensured that they were not forgotten, and – with the help of the country's civil society and the international community – an important blow had been struck in ending impunity.

---

[155] Ahmed, Azam. "Disappearance of 43 Mexican Students Must be Investigated Anew." *The New York Times*, June 5, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/world/americas/mexico-43-missing-students-investigation.html
[156] Centro Prodh, et al. "Federal Court in Mexico Orders New Investigation into Ayotzinapa Case." *WOLA.org*, June 4, 2018. https://www.wola.org/2018/06/historic-ruling-ayotzinapa-case/

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Reflections on the Human Rights Defense

As with any recent and ongoing events, assessing the historical impact of the responses to the Ayotzinapa attacks and forced disappearances must be done with the recognition that the full outcome is not yet known. Many human rights activists and commentators agree that Ayotzinapa has been a “watershed” event, perhaps a turning point in Mexico’s modern history of civil society engagement. After enduring decades of extreme violence, murders, and forced disappearances, ordinary Mexican citizens stood up against their governments, took to the streets in huge numbers, engaged domestic allies and international support, and refused to be silenced. They did so standing on the shoulders of earlier protest and civic movements, drawing support from student, teacher, labor, and leftist groups, but on a scale not seen in generations, capturing the attention of the country and the world, and threatening the political survival of a cynical, corrupt regime.

Still, few, if any, of the families of the missing students would consider that justice has been done, as their sons have not been found, their questions about what happened to them have not been answered, and those responsible for their disappearance and murder have not been identified and held accountable. For the Ayotzinapa families, having made history through their actions may matter little if they never learn what happened to their children and if their murderers go unpunished. Moreover, the popular revolt against the state and impunity has not even slowed the pace of kidnappings and murders in Mexico. There has not been another such clear and dramatic case as with the Ayotzinapa 43, but the country registered 7,350 persons

missing in 2019, the first full year of the López Obrador government – Mexico's second-highest number ever.[157]

While no one can reasonably argue that the victims of Ayotzinapa have gotten justice or that anything close to an end to impunity has been achieved in Mexico, neither can it be denied that Mexican civil society has succeeded in demonstrating that it can fight back against the state and expose its criminality. The *normalistas* of Ayotzinapa have not been found alive, their remains have not been located, the real motives and perpetrators of the crimes are not fully known, and no one has yet been tried and sentenced for the forced disappearances, tortures, and murders. And yet, what the families and other human rights defenders, with critical help from abroad, have managed to achieve in forcing a public reckoning and retreat by the Peña Nieto government is extraordinary. The response to the Iguala attacks and disappearances was markedly different from the responses to the thousands of other such crimes in the decades before; the people fought back, the world paid attention, and the government was thoroughly discredited, both at home and internationally. This time, the state could not ignore or cover up its crimes.

There were many aspects of the Ayotzinapa case that made the difference, that helped to transform a local tragedy into a landmark human rights event. First, as Maureen Meyer of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and many others have observed, the Iguala

[157] Sheridan, Mary Beth. "Disappearances in Mexico rose during López Obrador's first year, now top 73,000." *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-disappearance-lopez-obrador/2020/07/13/44e04a50-c089-11ea-b4f6-cb39cd8940fb_story.html

attacks stood out because there were so many victims killed and taken at once, and that they were all young students, mostly first-year *normalistas* between the ages of 18 and 20.[158] The government later tried to portray them as hoodlums or as a group that had been infiltrated by criminal gangs, but to the public – which saw the parents marching for their sons, and the posters of the students' collected photos, images of mere boys – they were simply victims, with no one but their abductors and murderers to blame.

In contrast to other forced disappearances, this time there was a large cadre of parents that joined together in grief and outrage, supported by the Ayotzinapa school, which provided them with a temporary home and base of operations. There, they got to know each other, and reinforced their common resolve to fight back. The families drew strength from each other, even as they responded in different ways. At first, most were engaged in the searches, and many of the parents made that their principal focus for months and even years. A large group of family members turned quickly to mobilization, however, working with the activist *normalistas* and school faculty to organize the mass protests, marches, and media events.[159] Some of the parents of course returned to their homes and their previous lives, but for the first time in memory a large, well-organized group of victims' family members would reliably turn out, week after week, demanding that the state return their children to them. The families were the engines of the civil society response. If it hadn't been for them, as Meyer observed, there could never have been the level of sustained visibility that the Ayotzinapa case garnered.[160]

---

[158] Meyer, Maureen. Telephone interview. October 7, 2020.
[159] Aguilar, personal interview.
[160] Meyer, telephone interview.

The school itself also made an enormous difference, providing the parents with both a support structure and the benefit of many years of experience in organizing demonstrations and other protest actions. The idealistic, leftist fervor of the students and faculty of the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College must have had an impact on the families while staying on campus, with every wall covered in revolutionary slogans. If not the school's politics, exactly, at least the energy and the students' readiness to enter into confrontation with the authorities galvanized many of the parents. Certainly, they acted in the early months after the attacks in close coordination with the school and its allies in the other teachers colleges and the labor unions.

Another factor that worked in civil society's favor was that the large number of people involved in the Iguala attacks meant that there were many survivors and eyewitnesses to give first-hand testimony. Not only were the students and others on the scene able and willing to provide their accounts to the news media, but they also had numerous cell phone recordings to share (although the video quality in most cases was poor, because of their basic devices). The fact that the movement could rely on so many student-survivors to appear before the media, alongside the families and activists, was a great advantage in sustaining the public's attention.[161] The prevalence of social media amplified those voices further, allowing civil society to mobilize and disseminate their messages far more broadly and effectively than was possible just a few years before. Social media helped the Ayotzinapa families and advocates level the playing field, where the government had previously been able to dominate coverage of human rights situations.

[161] Aguilar, personal interview.

Human rights defenders such as the Tlachinollan Center and Centro Prodh had been active in grass-roots advocacy on behalf of victims for many years before the Ayotzinapa disappearances, which prepared them to take on what would become their most high-profile and significant case. Their contributions were critical to the success of the campaign to prevent the Mexican government from covering up its crimes with a fraudulent investigation. As the journalist Marina Franco noted, it was those groups that represented the families in confronting the state, reached out to the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Group, secured the intervention of the IACHR and helped establish the GIEI, and undertook the research and preparation to litigate the case in Mexican courts – which eventually led to the May 2018 federal court decision ordering a re-do of the investigation. They have been tireless advocates, and even opened their premises to provide accommodations for family members who journey to Mexico City from Guerrero.[162] These Mexican human rights defenders were as indispensable to the civil society response as were the families and survivors themselves. Their close, coordinated action and years-long dedication demonstrated how effectively the people can challenge the state, at least in such landmark cases.

Clearly, an enormous debt is owed to the GIEI team, which served as a counter-weight to the Mexican government. As representatives of the international community, established experts in their own right, and having been invited by the Mexican government (however reluctantly), the GIEI not only shredded the official “historical truth,” but did so with authority and credibility. Fortunately for the GIEI investigation, the local, state and federal authorities failed to coordinate a plausible cover story, and preserved enough documentary evidence in their own

[162] Franco, Marina. Telephone interview. September 22, 2020.

files (perhaps never expecting that anyone would put all the pieces together) to allow the GIEI to build a persuasive case against the government and its theory of the crime. Similarly, the Argentine forensic team was able to establish with a high degree of confidence that the Mexican authorities planted evidence (refuting the government's claim that it had been present when bone fragments were "discovered") and also were able to perform the DNA analysis through the University of Innsbruck that confirmed the identities of the two victims whose partial remains have been found since 2014. Mexican law enforcement lacks the technical and professional capabilities to do their jobs correctly, and very few people trust them in any case. Unlike in previous cases of forced disappearance and other grave human rights violations, there was for Ayotzinapa a real alternative to the state's version of events. The public was able to trust the GIEI's reports and the work of the EAAF team.

Finally, one aspect of the Ayotzinapa case that helped sustained public attention was the mystery of it. The country and the world were justifiably shocked by the attacks and the disappearance of so many young men at once, but interest in the story has been maintained because of the unanswered questions surrounding the events and the motives, as well as the possibility (however remote) that the victims or their remains will yet be found. Had the bodies of the 43 been discovered soon afterward, it is unlikely that the case would have continued to generate as much attention and speculation by the public and the news media.

Among the enduring impacts of Ayotzinapa has been to change public perceptions in Mexico about forced disappearances, in addition to giving higher profile to these crimes, which occur at a far-higher frequency than had been commonly known before. María Luisa Aguilar

observed that forced disappearances and kidnappings have not been widely understood in the country, as many had assumed before Ayotzinapa that most victims were targeted because of their involvement in criminal activity, with as part of a drug trafficking organization or otherwise with some connection to it. In other words, that the victims were somehow themselves to blame for what had happened to them.[163] Since Ayotzinapa, many more families have gone public with their accounts of forced disappearances of family members, calling themselves *Los otros desaparecidos*, or the Other Disappeared. These people "had either been too afraid to speak out publicly or had slipped into desperation upon authorities' refusal to look for their loved ones," John Gibler writes. "In the first seven months of looking [on their own] they found more than 100 bodies in places where the state and federal investigators had supposedly searched and found none."[164] The intense focus on the Ayotzinapa case to the detriment of others has caused some tensions among the Other Disappeared, but, overall, the greater awareness of the issue and understanding about the nature of the victims have been positive and well received.[165]

In the past two years since the López Obrador government came to power on promises to end corruption and impunity, the record on Ayotzinapa has been mixed, marked by positive developments, but also frustration with the pace of progress. The new president named a Truth and Justice Commission as mandated by the May 2018 federal court decision, appointing victims' parents and human rights defenders as members. The López Obrador administration also increased funding for two bodies that had been established under the 2017 law on disappearances before the change of governments, but not made fully operational until 2019: the

[163] Aguilar, personal interview.
[164] Gibler, I Couldn't Even Imagine, pp. 231-233.
[165] Meyer, telephone interview.

National Search Commission (CNB), coordinating search efforts in the field, and the National Search System (SNB), meant to coordinate state institution efforts.[166] After considerable delay, the government approved in August 2020 a Standardized Protocol for Searching for Disappeared and Missing Persons, which is aimed at improving rapid and thorough responses to cases.[167] In December 2019, at the urging of victims' families and human rights groups, the Mexican government created an Extraordinary Mechanism of Forensic Identification, a temporary body to clear the backlog of unidentified remains.

On investigations, the new administration established in June 2019 a special unit within the attorney general's office to prosecute the Ayotzinapa case, headed by Omar Gómez Trejo, a respected human rights lawyer with UN experience who had served as the executive secretary to the GIEI.[168] Although the government was forced to release those charged under the previous administration because their testimony had been obtained through torture, the new special prosecutor was able to bring charges in March 2020 against five senior Mexican officials for forced disappearance, torture and obstruction of justice, and against an additional 46 municipal officials from Guerrero on related charges. The investigation is proceeding much more slowly than many families want, but there is a sense of some momentum and that the government is

---

[166] Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2020, Mexico*. hrw.org https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/mexico

[167] Government of Mexico. *Boletín No. 305/2020: Se aprueba Protocolo Homologado para la Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas.* https://www.gob.mx/segob/prensa/se-aprueba-protocolo-homologado-para-la-busqueda-de-personas-desaparecidas-y-no-localizadas

[168] Vicenteño, David. "Designan a Omar Gómez Trejo como fiscal para el caso Ayotzinapa." *Excelsior*, June 27, 2019. https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/designan-a-omar-gomez-trejo-como-fiscal-para-el-caso-ayotzinapa/1321028

serious about bringing officials and criminals to justice in the case.[169] In July 2020, Gómez Trejo announced that DNA analysis by the University of Innsbruck had confirmed remains of one of the missing *normalistas*, Christian Alfonso Rodríguez Telumbre – only the second of the 43 to be so identified. Acting on an anonymous tip, investigators found a bone fragment about half a mile from the Cocula dump site, and they reported that they expected to find more remains in the area.[170]

Despite such progress and the apparently serious intentions of senior Mexican officials, including López Obrador, who meets regularly with the Truth and Justice Commission, there is ample cause to be skeptical that the government will be able to locate the missing and successfully prosecute these crimes after so many years – especially when the plague of disappearances meanwhile continues unabated. Certainly for the families, much hope has died, despite the protestations of some that their sons will be found one day. But even the harshest critics of the López Obrador administration – for the slow pace in the cases, for the government's continued deference to the military despite pledging to end impunity (investigators are still not allowed full access to the army base in Iguala, for example), and for not ending the violence – must concede that Peña Nieto's criminal approach to this case has been reversed.

The fight for justice for the missing 43 and thousands of others like them is far from over. Mexico remains as violent a place as it was six years ago. And, yet, the experience of

---

[169] Meyer, Maureen and Moses Ngong. "Six Years After Ayotzinapa Disappearances, Mexico's Government Must Build on its Efforts to Provide Truth and Justice." wola.org, September 24, 2020. https://www.wola.org/analysis/6-years-ayotzinapa/

[170] Semple, Kirk, et al. "Years After 43 Mexican Students Vanished, a Victim's Remains Are Found." *The New York Times*, July 7, 2020.

Ayotzinapa has demonstrated to the Mexican people the power they hold, even against a corrupt and repressive regime determined to hide their crimes. The families and colleagues of those *normalistas*, working closely with allies among human rights defenders, labor activists, the media, and other members of civil society, and with the assistance of international human rights mechanisms, refused to submit to the state and exposed its crimes to the world. Whatever happens in the year ahead, whether the investigations and prosecutions progress or not, Ayotzinapa will stand as a critical point in history, an episode that will serve as a landmark event in Mexico's long struggle for justice and fundamental human rights.

Bibliography

"7 Documentos Que Han Dado Forma Al Caso Ayotzinapa." *Animal Político*, September 28, 2015. *www.animalpolitico.com/2015/09/7-documentos-que-han-dado-forma-al-caso-ayotzinapa/*.

20 Minutos. "Normalista: 'A Julio C. Mondragón lo desollaron porque escupió a la cara del agresor." *20minutos.com.mx*, October 30, 2014. https://www.20minutos.com.mx/noticia/18960/0/normalistas/iguala/escupir-cara-agresor-asesinato/

Abbott, Bea. Personal interview. November 7, 2020.

"About Caravana 43." Caravana43.org. http://www.caravana43.com/about.html

Aguilar, Maria Luisa. "Las familias no les piden atención psicológica, sino que se pongan a buscar a sus hijos." Interview by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. October 27, 2014. https://mx.boell.org/es/2014/10/27/las-familias-no-les-piden-atencion-psicologica-sino-que-se-pongan-buscar-sus-hijos

Aguilar, Maria Luisa. Personal interview. November 6, 2020.

Ahmed, Azam. "Disappearance of 43 Mexican Students Must be Investigated Anew." *The New York Times*, June 5, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/world/americas/mexico-43-missing-students-investigation.html

Ahmed, Azam. "Spyware in Mexico Targeted Investigators Seeking Students." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/world/americas/mexico-missing-students-pegasus-spyware.html

Ahmed, Azam and Paulina Villegas. "Investigators Say Mexico Has Thwarted Efforts to Solve Students' Disappearance." *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/world/americas/investigators-say-mexico-has-thwarted-efforts-to-solve-students-disappearance.html

Archibold, Randal C. "43 Missing Students, a Mass Grave and a Suspect: Mexico's Police." *The New York Times*, October 6, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/world/americas/43-missing-students-a-mass-grave-and-a-suspect-mexicos-police-.html

"Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) Presents Expert Study in Ayotzinapa Case Confirming That the Government's Official Version Is Impossible." *Centro Prodh: The Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center*, February 9, 2016. www.centroprodh.org.mx/en/?p=561.

Associated Press. "'I've Had Enough' Says Mexican Attorney General in Missing Students Gaffe." *The Guardian*, November 9, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/09/protests-flare-in-mexico-after-attorney-generals-enough-im-tired-remarks

"Atrae PGR caso de normalistas desaparecidos, manda peritos." *El Universal*, Mexico City, October 4, 2014. *Proquest*, http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1585914895?accountid=35635.

Aviña, Alexander. "Seizing Hold of Memories in Moments of Danger." *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-82,* edited by Fernando Herrera Calderon and Adela Cedillo, Taylor and Francis, 2012.

"Ayotzinapa 43 Caravan Information." Global Exchange, globalexchange.org, March 17, 2015. https://globalexchange.org/2015/03/17/ayotzinapa-43-caravan-information/

"Ayotzinapa Parents Demand That Mexico Not Stop the Search for the Disappeared." *Explica*, April 27, 2020. www.explica.co/ayotzinapa-parents-demand-that-mexico-not-stop-the-search-for-the-disappeared/.

Baranda, Antonio and Luis Fernando Lozano. "Reprochan a Peña falta de resultados." *El Norte*, October 30, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1618174783/973CE9D69EC14813PQ/54?accountid=35635

Cabrera, Carlos. "Denuncian amenazas contra defensor de normalistas." *El Universal*, May 23, 2012. https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/849223.html

"Califica Amnistia de "caótica" investigación de caso Iguala." *Milenio*, Monterrery, Mexico, October 10, 2014. *Proquest,* http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1609614645?accountid=35635.

"Cardin Calls for Justice On 2nd Anniversary of Mexican Students' Disappearance." *United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,* September 29, 2016. www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/cardin-calls-for-justice-on-2nd-anniversary-of-mexican-students-disappearance.

Centro Prodh, et al. "Federal Court in Mexico Orders New Investigation into Ayotzinapa Case." *WOLA.org*, June 4, 2018. https://www.wola.org/2018/06/historic-ruling-ayotzinapa-case/

Chouza, Paula. "Una protesta en Iguala termina con el incendio del Palacio Municipal." *El Pais*, October 23, 2014. https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/10/22/actualidad/1414005121_031793.html

Committee to Protect Journalists. Online database. https://cpj.org/data/?status=Killed&start_year=2009&end_year=2020&group_by=location&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker. Accessed October 2, 2020.

Díaz, Gloria and Arturo Rodríguez. "López Obrador formaliza comisión para la verdad y justicia del caso Ayotzinapa." *Proceso*, December 3, 2018. https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2018/12/3/lopez-obrador-formaliza-comision-para-la-verdad-justicia-del-caso-ayotzinapa-216529.htm

Doyle, Kate. "Transcripts of Intercepted Cell Phones Open New Lines of Investigation in Ayotzinapa Case." *UNREDACTED*, National Security Archive, March 29, 2019. www.unredacted.com/2018/04/16/transcripts-of-intercepted-cell-phones-open-new-lines-of-investigation-in-ayotzinapa-case/#respond.

EFE, Spanish News Agency. "Miles de personas reclaman vivos a estudiantes desaperecidos en sur de Mexico." October 3, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1566948338/914EF13380554B5APQ/112?accountid=35635#center

"Eight Defendants Charged with Distributing Heroin in Chicago Area on Behalf of Guerrero Unidos Mexican Drug Cartel." *The United States Attorney's Office*, The United States Department of Justice, December 10, 2014. www.justice.gov/usao-ndil/pr/eight-defendants-charged-distributing-heroin-chicago-area-behalf-guerrero-unidos.

Evans, Michael. "Prelude to Iguala: 'Heavy-Handed Police Tactics' Used against Ayotzinapa Students in 2011." *The National Security Archive*, October 7, 2015. www.nsarchive2.gwu.edu/news/20151007-prelude-to-iguala-heavy-handed-police-tactics-against-ayotzinapa-students/.

"Fiscal: narco mató a normalistas en Iguala." *El Universal*, Mexico City, October 5, 2014. *Proquest*: http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1586057599?accountid=35635.

Fleury, Hannah. "Ayotzinapa Comes to New York City." *SocialistWorker.org*, April 30, 2015. https://socialistworker.org/2015/04/30/ayotzinapa-comes-new-york-city

Forensic Architecture. *The Enforced Disappearance of the Ayotzinapa Students*. forensic-architecture.org, 2017. https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-enforced-disappearance-of-the-ayotzinapa-students

"Forensic Team Finds Remains in Mexico Dump, but No Sign of 43 Students." *Reuters*. February 9, 2016. www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence-idUSKCN0VJ00J.

Franco, Marina. "Five Years Ago, 43 Students Vanished. The Mystery, and the Pain, Remain." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 Sept. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/world/americas/Ayotzinapa-mexico-students-anniversary.html.

Franco, Marina. Telephone interview. September 22, 2020.

Gallagher, Janice. Telephone Interview. October 12, 2020.

Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. "What Happened to Mexico's Missing 43 Students In 'A Massacre In Mexico'." *NPR*, NPR, 21 Oct. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/10/21/658900014/what-happened-to-mexicos-missing-43-students-in-a-massacre-in-mexico.

Gibler, John. "The Disappeared." *California Sunday Magazine*, January 4, 2015. https://stories.californiasunday.com/2015-01-04/mexico-the-disappeared-en

Gibler, John. *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us*. City Lights Books, 2017.

Goldman, Francisco. "Crisis in Mexico: The Protests for the Missing Forty-Three." *The New Yorker*, November 12, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/crisis-mexico-disappearance-forty-three

Goldman, Francisco. "Crisis in Mexico: Could Forty-Three Missing Students Spark a Revolution?" *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/crisis-mexico-forty-three-missing-students-spark-revolution

Goldman, Francisco. "Mexico's Missing Forty-Three: One Year, Many Lies, and a Theory That Might Make Sense." *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2015. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/mexicos-missing-forty-three-one-year-many-lies-and-a-theory-that-might-make-sense

Goldman, Francisco. "The Missing Forty-Three: The Mexican Government Sabotages Its Own Independent Investigation." *The New Yorker*, April 22, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-missing-forty-three-the-mexican-government-sabotages-its-own-independent-investigation

González Rodríguez, Sergio. *The Iguala 43: The Truth and Challenge of Mexico's Disappeared Students*. Semiotext(e), 2015.

Government of Mexico. *Boletín No. 305/2020: Se aprueba Protocolo Homologado para la Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas.* https://www.gob.mx/segob/prensa/se-aprueba-protocolo-homologado-para-la-busqueda-de-personas-desaparecidas-y-no-localizadas

Government of Mexico. Comisión para la Verdad y Acceso a la Justica en el Caso Ayotzinapa. http://www.comisionayotzinapa.segob.gob.mx/es/Comision_para_la_Verdad#005

Guerrero, Jesús. "Exigen la destitución de Gobernador y Edil." *El Norte*, September 30, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1566324074/E39EA24823C54D07PQ/43?accountid=35635#center

Guerrero, Jesús and Cesar Martínez. "'No se vayan'." *Reforma*, April 28, 2016. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1784759882/fulltext/296BA0D7CACB4E89PQ/7?accountid=35635

Hernández, Anabel. *Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty-Three Students*. Verso Books, 2020.

Hernández, Jaime. “México solicita ayuda a CIDH por Ayotzinapa.” *El Universal*, October 31, 2014. https://search-proquest-com.i.ezproxy.nypl.org/docview/1618335160/B4755D20BFAE4836PQ/38?accountid=35635

“How Do 43 Students Just Vanish into Thin Air? A Look at the 'Ayotzinapa' Case That Has Long Haunted Mexico.” *National Post*, June 6, 2018, www.nationalpost.com/news/world/how-do-43-students-just-vanish-into-thin-air-a-look-at-the-ayotzinapa-case-that-has-long-haunted-mexico.

Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2020, Mexico*. hrw.org https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/mexico

“Implican a cártel en desapariciones.” *Reforma*, Mexico City, October 18, 2014. *Proquest*: http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1613425866?accountid=35635

“Imputa PGR a Abarca las desapariciones.” *El Universal*, Mexico City, October 22, 2014. *Proquest*: http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1615169189?accountid=35635

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Press Release 008/15, Interdisciplinary Group of Experts to Launch at IACHR Headquarters its Work on the Case of the Students of Ayotzinapa. Mexico*. OAS, January 30, 2015. http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2015/008.asp

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Press Release 136/14, IACHR Makes Official Technical Cooperation Agreement About Ayotzinapa Students in Mexico*. OAS, November 18, 2014. http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2014/136.asp

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Resolución 28/2014, Medida cautelar No. 409-14*. October 3, 2014. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/pdf/2014/MC409-14-ES.pdf

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Situation Report: Special Follow-up Mechanism to the Ayotzinapa Case of the IACHR*. Organization of American States, 2018. www.oas.org/en/iachr/docs/Mesa/ReportAyotzinapa.pdf.

Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Ayotzinapa Report: Investigation and Initial Conclusions (I)*, *Summary.* Organization of American States, 2015. http://media.wix.com/ugd/3a9f6f_e1df5a84680a4a8a969bd45453da1e31.pdf

Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Informe Ayotzinapa (I): Investigación y primeras conclusiones de las desapariciones y*

homocidios de los normalistas de Ayotzinapa. Organization of American States, 2015. https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/actividades/giei/giei-informeayotzinapa1.pdf

Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Informe Ayotzinapa II: Avances y nuevas conclusiones sobre la investigación, búsqueda y atención a las víctimas*. Organization of American States, 2016. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/actividades/giei/GIEI-InformeAyotzinapa2.pdf

Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Third Visit of the Interdisciplinary Group of Experts to Mexico: First Findings and Specific Recommendations*. OAS, May 11, 2015. https://prensagieiayotzi.wixsite.com/giei-ayotzinapa/single-post/2015/05/11/Third-visit-of-the-Interdisciplinary-Group-of-Independent-Experts-to-Mexico-First-findings-and-specific-recommendations

International Crisis Group. *Disappeared: Justice Denied in Mexico's Guerrero State*. Latin America Report No. 55, October 23, 2015. https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/55-disappeared-justice-denied-in-mexico-s-guerrero-state.pdf

Kyle, Chris. *Violence and Insecurity in Guerrero*. Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars and Justice in Mexico, University of San Diego, January 2015.

Legideño Vargas, Hilda. "One Year After the Disappearance of 43 Mexican Students, Their Mothers are Still Demanding Answers." Interview by Amy Goodman. *Democracynow.org*., October 5, 2015. https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/5/mexico

Lovato, Roberto. "How the 'Desaparecidos' of Ayotzinapa Have Sparked a U.S.-Mexican Solidarity Movement." *The Nation*, April 21, 2015. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-desaparecidos-ayotzinapa-have-sparked-us-mexican-solidarity-movement/

Maldonado, Tryno. *Faces of the Disappeared: Ayotzinapa: A Chronicle of Injustice*. Schaffner Press, 2018.

Maldonado, Tryno. "Las Mujeres De Ayotzinapa: Cristina Bautista Salvador." *Radio Zapatista*, 2 Oct. 2019, radiozapatista.org/?p=32276&lang=en.

Malkin, Elisabeth and Azam Ahmed. "U.S. Withholds $5 Million in Antidrug Aid to Mexico as Human Rights Rebuke." *The New York Times,* October 19, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/20/world/americas/us-withholds-5-million-in-antidrug-aid-to-mexico-over-human-rights.html

Melesio, Lucina. "Case of 43 Ayotzinapa Missing Students Unresolved Five Years On." *Mexico | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 26 Sept. 2019, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/case-43-ayotzinapa-missing-students-unresolved-years-190926204902655.html.

"Members of U.S. Congress Call for Progress in Mexico's Ayotzinapa Case." *WOLA*, 26 Sept. 2019, www.wola.org/2019/09/congress-calls-for-progress-mexico-atyozinapa-case/.

Meyer, Maureen and Moses Ngong. “Six Years After Ayotzinapa Disappearances, Mexico’s Government Must Build on its Efforts to Provide Truth and Justice.” wola.org, September 24, 2020. https://www.wola.org/analysis/6-years-ayotzinapa/

Meyer, Maureen. Telephone interview. October 7, 2020.

Miller, Ashley. “Truth Obscured: 41st Anniversary of Mexico's Corpus Christi Massacre.” *UNREDACTED*, National Security Archive, 11 June 2012, unredacted.com/2012/06/11/truth-obscured-41st-anniversary-of-mexicos-corpus-christi-massacre/.

National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy. *Report of Poverty in Mexico 2010: The Country, Its States and Its Municipalities*. CONEVAL, 2012.

National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). *National Survey of Victimization and Perceptions of Public Security (ENVIPE)*. Government of Mexico, 2015. https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/envipe/2015/doc/envipe2015_presentacion_nacional.pdf

Ocampo Arista, Sergio Ocampo. “Policías balean a normalistas de Ayotzinapa en Iguala; 5 Muertos.” *La Jornada*, 28 Sept. 2014, www.jornada.com.mx/2014/09/28/politica/005n1pol

Ocampo, Sergio and Rubicela Morelos. “Padres de los normalistas exigen pruebas científicas.” *La Jornada*, November 8, 2014. https://www.jornada.com.mx/2014/11/08/politica/003n1pol

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Double Injustice: report on Human Rights Violations in the Investigation of the Ayotzinapa Case, Executive Summary*. March 15, 2018. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MX/ExecutiveReport Mexico_March2018_EN.PDF.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. “UN Experts Urge Mexico to Counter Current Smear Campaigns and Openly Support Right Defenders.” United Nations, ohchr.org, April 6, 2016. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19784&LangID=E

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. “Mexico: ‘Much remains to be done to deliver truth and justice in the Ayotzinapa case’ – UN experts.” United Nations, ohchr.org, April 26, 2016. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19883&LangID

“One Year After the Disappearance of 43 Mexican Students, Their Mothers Are Still Demanding Answers.” *Democracy Now!*, 5 Oct. 2015, www.democracynow.org/2015/10/5/mexico.

Open Society Foundations. *Broken Justice in Mexico’s Guerrero State*. Open Society, 2015. https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/3a1d88da-b9ba-4a01-885e-4e0286cb06d0/broken-justice-mexicos-guerrero-state-eng-20150826.pdf

Open Society Foundations. *Undeniable Atrocities: Confronting Crimes Against Humanity in Mexico*. Open Society, 2016. https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/7dc9f3b9-21dc-4d14-90fd-aaa29ff12cc3/undenialble-atrocities-2nd-edition-20160808.pdf

Organization of American States. "CIDH oficializa acuerdo de cooperación técnica sobre estudiantes de Ayotzinapa, México." Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, November 18, 2014. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2014/136.asp

Organization of American States and the Government of Mexico. *Acuerdo para la incorporación de asistencia técnica desde la perspectiva de los derechos humanos de la desaparición forzada de 43 estudiantes de la Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa, etc.* OAS, November 18, 2014. http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/mandato/docs/Acuerdo-Addendum-Mexico-CIDH.pdf

Ortiz, Alexis. "Ayotzinapa: 'No Espero Ver Muerto a Mi Hijo.'" *El Universal* , 26 Sept. 2019, www.eluniversalqueretaro.mx/nacion/ayotzinapa-no-espero-ver-muerto-mi-hijo.

Peace Brigades International. *Human Rights Defenders in the State of Guerrero*. PBI Mexico Project, 2007, pp. 13-14, 24-25. https://pbi-mexico.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/mexico/files/Defenderes_Guerrero_PBI_Mexico_ENG.pdf

Pigeonutt, Vania. "El fan de Michael Jackson." *43 X Ayotzinapa*, www.centroprodh.org.mx/43xayotzinapa/index.php/project/benjamin-ascencio-bautista/.

Pigeonutt, Vania. "Policías atacan a normalistas en Guerrero." *El Universal*, September 28, 2014. https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/2014/policias-atacan-a-normalistas-en-guerrero-1041696.html

Pigeonutt, Vania. "Guerrero: queman Palacio de Gobierno." *El Universal*, October 14, 2014. https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2014/guerrero-queman-palacio-de-gobierno-1045855.html

"Que Aguirre asuma su responsibilidad: Peña." *Milenio*, Monterrey, Mexico, October 1, 2014. *Proquest,* http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1566620563?accountid=35635.

Rangel, Yunuhen. "Two Years of Torment, of Searching, of Refusing to Give Up." *NACLA.org*, North American Congress on Latin America, September 26, 2016.

"Reconoce PGJ Guerrero uso excesivo de fuerza en Iguala." *Milenio*, Monterrey, Mexico, September 29, 2014. *Proquest*, http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/1566184221?accountid=35635.

Ruiz Segovia, Camila. Telephone Interview. September 28, 2020.

Semple, Kirk, et al. "Years After 43 Mexican Students Vanished, a Victim's Remains Are Found." *The New York Times*, July 7, 2020.

Sheridan, Mary Beth. "Disappearances in Mexico rose during López Obrador's first year, now top 73,000." *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-disappearance-lopez-obrador/2020/07/13/44e04a50-c089-11ea-b4f6-cb39cd8940fb_story.html

Shirk, David, and Joel Wallman. "Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, December 2015, Vol. 59, No. 8, p. 1348. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24546346

Solera, Claudia, and Juan Pablo Reyes. "Claman por desaparecidos; marchan miles en México y otros países." *Excelsior*, October 9, 2014. https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2014/10/09/985874

Truth Commission of the State of Guerrero. *Final Activity Report*. October 15, 2014. http://congresogro.gob.mx/files/InformeFinalCOMVERDAD.pdf

United Nations. *UN Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions*. United Nations, 1991. https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/UN_Manual_on_the_Effective_Prevention_and_Investigation[1].pdf

United Nations, General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on his mission to Mexico*. A/HRC/37/51/Add.2, February 12, 2018. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/037/94/PDF/G1803794.pdf?OpenElement

"Vargas Llosa: México es una Dictadura Perfecta." *El Pais*, September 1, 1990. https://elpais.com/diario/1990/09/01/cultura/652140001_850215.html

Vicenteño, David. "Designan a Omar Gómez Trejo como fiscal para el caso Ayotzinapa." *Excelsior*, June 27, 2019. https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/designan-a-omar-gomez-trejo-como-fiscal-para-el-caso-ayotzinapa/1321028

Vilchis, Raúl. "For an Aggrieved Father, the New York City Marathon is More Than a Race." *The Guardian*, November 3, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/nov/03/for-an-aggrieved-father-the-new-york-city-marathon-is-more-than-a-race

Wilkinson, Tracy. "Mexico governor steps down over missing students." *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2014. https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-governor-steps-down-missing-students-20141023-story.html

WOLA. "Resource Page: Analysis and Information on Mexico's Ayotzinapa Case." *WOLA*, Washington Office on Latin America. www.wola.org/analysis/analysis-and-information-on-mexicos-ayotzinapa-case/.

Woodman, Stephen. "Mexico Students v the State: Anniversary of 1968 Massacre Reopens Recent Wounds." *BBC News*, BBC, October 1, 2018. www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-45705009.

"Ya me cansé" y otras claves de la conferencia de Murillo Karam." *El Informador*, Guadalajara, Mexico, November 7, 2014. https://www.informador.mx/Mexico/Ya-me-canse-y-otras-claves-de-la-conferencia-de-Murillo-Karam-20141107-0043.html